



## PROMISING PRACTICES

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*What did you do in school today?* is a multi-year research and development initiative of the Canadian Education Association (CEA), funded through collaboration with the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) and a number of Canadian school districts. Launched in 2007, the initiative was designed to capture, assess and inspire new ideas for enhancing the learning experiences of adolescents in classrooms and schools. Research and development work is being carried out through CEA's partnership with the Galileo Educational Network and The Learning Bar Inc. For more information, please visit [www.cea-ace.ca](http://www.cea-ace.ca)

# Using Survey Data to Improve Student Learning: A Team Approach

For the past six years, the Halifax Regional School Board has been developing a solid framework for improving student achievement. As a school principal, I welcomed the board's direction because it resonated with my own beliefs about our purpose as educators and our need to use data effectively.

The Canadian Education Association's (CEA) initiative, *What did you do in school today?* is about reflecting on thoughtful questions and using data to make improvements.<sup>1</sup> It has played a significant role in creating positive change in our school over the past two years, but it didn't happen on its own, and it didn't happen overnight. Before our school could make those improvements, we had to get comfortable with data.

When I started as principal at Sir Robert Borden Junior High School in 2007, I set ambitious goals for the school, inspired by what I believe about evidence-based decision making, professional learning, teamwork, and the importance of measuring everything we do as a staff by its impact on student learning. However, I could see at the end of our first day together that the staff was completely overwhelmed; they weren't yet comfortable using data and clearly felt it might be used to judge them.

Just as we traditionally have blamed students when they struggle to succeed in school, I attributed the fear and resistance to the culture of the school, not realizing that I had forged ahead as the hare, when I should have taken the slow and steady path of the tortoise. I had to pause and try to see my own ideas from the perspective of the staff. What context had I provided? What connections had I made to help us all see the relationships among the many different initiatives that seem to continually come at us at high speed? What coaching had I provided to foster the skills of data analysis?

I took a big step back and a few small steps forward. Working as a team, we developed shared answers to these questions, and we started to explore the value of teamwork for school and classroom improvement. We began asking the right questions and effectively using the answers to guide our classroom practice. And so, when our school was

given the opportunity to participate in the *What did you do in school today?* survey, we were ready. Matthew Moriarty, a teacher at SRB, took on the role of survey coordinator.

**Moriarty: When we first ran the survey in the 2007/2008 school year, the students had no experience in answering questions about their learning. Their responses showed that they didn't understand what exactly this could mean to them. It was a chance for them to have their voices heard – something that seems so elementary from a learning perspective; ask the ones who are learning how they learn best. As a school we did our best to understand how to change our classroom practices to reflect the changing ways students learn. As the coordinator, I had to find a way for the students to understand the great tool they had at their fingertips.**

The first results were not positive. It was tempting for staff to dismiss the students' responses as a rant to a captive audience. But I kept the results on our agenda and eventually added other topics, including monthly student office referrals, suspensions,

student assessments, and student support data. Two questions helped us to use the data productively: What patterns are showing up in the data? What little things can we do to address the concerns of students? These questions assured staff that our focus was where it needed to be – not on evaluating individual teachers, but on what we might do as a team to set some new conditions for learning.

In September 2008, I made adjustments to my own practice and introduced the *What did you do in school today?* project early to new staff. I listed everything I had done the previous year to develop a team approach to decision-making and then presented data from a teacher's survey, indicating that teachers clearly did not yet feel that they were part of a team or involved in shared decision making. I then asked the staff to describe what teamwork and shared decision-making meant to them. Their responses provided a focus for our ongoing development as a professional learning community. Figure 1 shows the agenda we followed at one transformational school-based professional development day.

## FIGURE 1

### Agenda for School-Based Professional Development Setting Conditions for Teaching and Learning – September 2008

- Article discussion: Engaged in Learning
  - What are your initial responses to the article?
  - Where do these ideas fit into our current practices?
  - What are the connections to the Positive Effective Behavioural Supports (PEBS) initiative?
- Making Connections
- Exploring the Data
  - WDYDIST – Student and Teacher Results (2007 – 2008)
  - Results from The Superintendent's Task Force on Student Engagement
  - Office Referral Data
  - Student Suspension Data
  - Homework Lunch Program
- *Where are we now?*
- *What are our next steps?*
- *What do we do with student feedback? Students as partners in school culture and learning*
- Student Engagement
- School Goal For 2008 – 2009
- Student Leadership Team/Student Focus Group
- School Expectation Matrix

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Discussing the short article, “Student Engagement for Effective Teaching and Deep Learning”,<sup>2</sup> gave us a new appreciation for the bigger picture of student engagement and how its different dimensions – social, academic, and intellectual – connect with everything we do as educators. The article confirmed what we knew but weren’t necessarily practicing: in order for students to care enough to engage in learning, they have to know they are part of shared decision-making – that they have a voice.

Informed by our conversation about engaging all students, we invited students to form a student leadership team – a significant shift from years past, when student councils had consisted of two students from each class, chosen by the teachers. Thirty-three students volunteered.

Amanda McLeod and Natalie Dison served as the teacher liaisons to the student leadership team.

**McLeod and Dison: Last year, the survey identified key areas of the school that needed improvement. Students noted that the school facilities had been improved. They were impressed that their opinions were listened to and their concerns were acted upon. Students viewed these changes as tangible proof of the power of their voice. One student stated, “There is definitely improvement in the school – definitely an improvement due to the survey.”**

Focusing on student engagement and paying attention to what students have to say has helped to change the culture of our school. Teacher Lacey DeCoste has seen an impact of the survey in her classroom.

**DeCoste: With *What did you do in school today?*, students tell us point-blank how they learn best. As a teacher, I feel that it is my responsibility to use that information to establish an engaging learning environment. There is a quotation that I keep in the back of my mind while I prepare my daily lessons: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” The students asked for just this on the survey; they want to be involved in their learning. We should listen.**

We have become much more comfortable with asking questions of our students and of ourselves. One of the questions is “What do we do if students aren’t learning?” Data from the *What did you do in school today?* survey told us that some students did not feel they were being supported when they were struggling. That’s difficult to hear, but we had to listen. As a staff team, we developed a student support system that provides in-class support, in-school suspensions, extra help after school, and a mandatory lunch homework program for all students. With creative scheduling and a grant from the Department of Education, I was able to hire Kyla Cyr as our student support teacher.

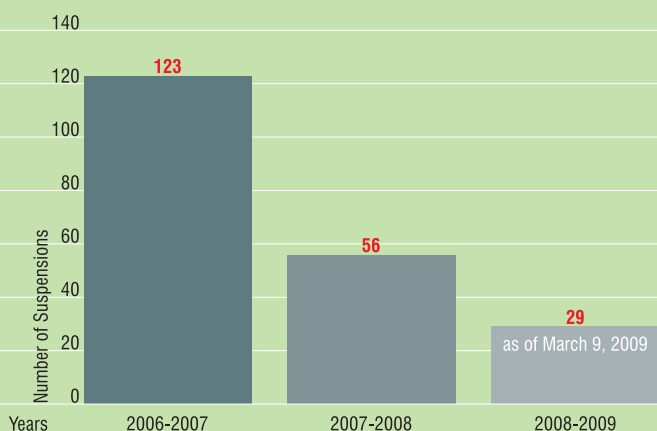
**Cyr: My main objective as a support teacher is prevention. Using data collected on a weekly/monthly basis helps me determine what I can do to help a student or students, as well as what we can do as a school team to prevent further issues from occurring. I am here not only for the students but for the teachers as well. Our goal is to keep kids in school so that they can learn. (See Figure 2)**

Another key question for teachers is “How can I improve my practice?” Rich data, professional knowledge, and a deeper understanding of how small changes can make a big difference have brought staff together as a team and energized our commitment to create positive conditions for teaching and learning. Erin Dillon is a math teacher who has seen the positive effects of professional sharing and teamwork on her classroom climate.

**Dillon: To help me with effective questioning, our math coach came into my classes to write down every question I asked during a lesson. At the end of the class she had written down about 60 questions that I had either answered myself or asked in a way that invited only one answer. The next day I tried more open-ended questions and really waited until I got an answer. It’s hard to stand in front of a class and listen to silence after asking a question, but once the students realized I wasn’t going to answer my own questions they really became more engaged. It was like I wasn’t going to do the work for them anymore and, to my surprise, they didn’t seem to mind.**

Students are also becoming a vital part of shared decision-making in the school. Our student leadership team is involved in reviewing student survey data and providing input on what teachers *and* students can do to create change. They now prepare and run monthly assemblies that celebrate student success and profile our ongoing data partnership. Amanda McLeod and Natalie Dison, the teacher-liaisons with the student leadership team, found that students have noticed improvements in more than the facilities.

**FIGURE 2: Student Suspensions Chart: 2006-2009**



**FIGURE 3: 2008 Results for *What did you do in school today?***

- Student response rate – 96%
- Teacher response rate – 95%
- Improvement in 20 of the 23 measures of the student survey.
- 18 of 19 teachers who responded to the survey identified the school’s team approach as one of the things they like about the school.

**EN BREF** L'enquête en ligne *Qu'as-tu fait à l'école aujourd'hui?* (WDYDIST) de l'Association canadienne d'éducation (ACE) vise à amorcer la réflexion sur des questions pertinentes et à utiliser des données pour apporter des améliorations. Elle a joué un rôle important pour engendrer un changement positif à l'école secondaire Sir Robert Borden Junior d'Halifax au cours des deux dernières années. Avant que l'école puisse mettre en œuvre ces changements, toutefois, la direction et le personnel ont dû s'adapter à utiliser des données pour susciter de nouvelles conditions d'apprentissage. Pour changer la culture de l'école, il a été utile de privilégier l'engagement des élèves et de tenir compte de ce que les élèves ont à dire. Les enseignants accordent de l'importance à l'engagement des élèves et à l'amélioration. Une équipe de représentants étudiants passe en revue les données de l'enquête auprès des élèves et propose des façons dont les enseignants et les élèves peuvent amorcer le changement.

McLeod and Dison: We asked them about their experience with *What did you do in school today?* They talked to us about feeling like they had better relationships with teachers and that they were listened to. Students felt learning had also increased as a by-product of the survey. Teachers have implemented seating charts in classrooms as a direct result of student suggestions. Students believe this has helped their productivity in the classroom. Students made the connection between the survey, their suggestions, and action being taken. As one student put it, "We truly feel like our opinions matter. That's something new for us."

**NEXT STEPS**

Day by day our school continues to improve, and using data like *What did you do in school today?* gives us information on next steps for the professional development. For me as a leader, the student and teacher data, along with assessment results and other measures, are an invaluable source of information for planning. For example, data from one open-ended question in the student survey – *How can teachers help you learn better?* – is helping me to see that students are not yet able to articulate their learning needs, which indicates that we need professional development around effective assessment practices, with an emphasis on student involvement and feedback.

To this end, our staff is reading Mike Schmoker's *Results Now*. The book outlines a plan that focuses on the importance of consistent curriculum, authentic literacy education, and professional learning communities for teachers to improve student learning. We

will meet as a staff to discuss what we are doing to engage students in strategic reading, in writing with explicit guidance, in argument, and in discussion.

*What did you do in school today?* provides data that is clearly directed at the goal of authentic student engagement and the information we need to develop next steps for school improvement and the professional development of our team. Of course, like all data, the *What did you do in school today?* data is what you make of it; using it well requires practice and persistence. As a staff, we are beginning to engage in and understand what Earl & Katz describe as an "Inquiry Habit of Mind".<sup>3</sup>

Sir Robert Borden is a different school from last year (see Figure 3). As a team, we share decision making and ideas; teachers feel supported by their colleagues and administration and are open to new ideas. We are now having professional conversations about learning and what the data tells us about learning. Teachers are starting to involve students in their learning and – importantly – student achievement continues to improve (see Figure 4). Office referrals continue to decrease and student suspensions are less than half of what they were in the 2006-07

school year. We have created consistent expectations for both learning and conduct.

It takes courage and confidence to explore and implement practices that will meet the learning needs of students today. As a leader/coach, I am very fortunate to have a courageous and confident team, and I am very proud of the work they are doing. |

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**Notes**

- 1 *What did you do in school today?* uses The Learning Bar Inc.'s *Tell Them From Me Survey* with the addition of new measures of intellectual engagement and instructional challenge. <http://www.thelearningbar.com/>
- 2 Jodene Dunleavy and Penny Milton, "Student Engagement for Effective Teaching and Deep Learning," *Education Canada* 48, no.5 (2008): 4-8. [http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/StudentEngagement\\_NovTheme08.pdf](http://www.cea-ace.ca/media/en/StudentEngagement_NovTheme08.pdf)
- 3 Lorna Earl and Steven Katz, *Leading Schools in a Data-Rich World* (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2006).

**FIGURE 4: Evidence of student improvement in math (below) and reading (right)**

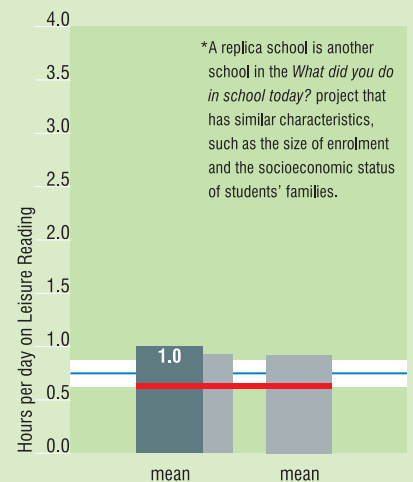
Sir Robert Borden 2008 Grade 9 Assessment Results 1 No Response 2 Inadequate 3 Low 4 Proficient 5 Excellent

■ 2007-2008 ■ 2006-2007 ■ 2005-2006



Sir Robert Borden: Hours per day on leisure reading

■ Replica School\* ■ This Year ■ Year 2007



\*A replica school is another school in the *What did you do in school today?* project that has similar characteristics, such as the size of enrolment and the socioeconomic status of students' families.