



# WHAT DID YOU DO IN SCHOOL TODAY?

TRANSFORMING CLASSROOMS THROUGH SOCIAL, ACADEMIC AND INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT

## First National Report: Summary

J. Douglas Willms, Sharon Friesen and Penny Milton.

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Through *What did you do in school today?* the Canadian Education Association, in partnership with the Canadian Council on Learning and school districts across Canada, are bringing life to the idea of student engagement in the classroom, and exploring its powerful relationship with adolescent learning, student achievement, and effective teaching.

A first look at the initiative's results are presented in the initiative's first national report – *What did you do in school today?: Transforming Classrooms through Social, Academic and Intellectual Engagement*, written by J. Douglas Willms, Sharon Friesen and Penny Milton. The national report is available on CEA's website ([www.cea-ace.ca](http://www.cea-ace.ca)) along with two supporting documents, *Exploring the Concept of Student Engagement and its Implications for Teaching and Learning in Canada* by Jodene Dunleavy and Penny Milton, and *Teaching Effectiveness: A Framework and Rubric*, by Sharon Friesen.

## ENGAGED LEARNING: ENGAGED TEACHING

Like most projects that aim to enhance student engagement, *What did you do in school today?* explores social and academic engagement; but, the initiative also offers a unique set of measures that allows schools to begin understanding students' experiences of engagement in learning through the newer concept of intellectual engagement.

### Social Engagement

A sense of belonging and participation in school life.

### Academic Engagement

Participation in the formal requirements of schooling.

### Intellectual Engagement

A serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher-order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge.

To capture, assess and inspire new ideas about student engagement, the initiative includes an on-line student survey that adds newly developed measures of intellectual engagement and instructional challenge to the platform of the *Tell Them From Me* survey developed by The Learning Bar Inc. Data emerging from the survey provides schools with unique opportunities to explore what students are doing in classrooms, how they feel about their experiences of learning, and whether the work they are asked to do contributes to learning.

FIRST AND FOREMOST, EFFECTIVE TEACHING  
PRACTICE BEGINS WITH THOUGHTFUL,  
INTENTIONAL DESIGNS FOR LEARNING...

This expanded framework for thinking about student engagement is also a catalyst for staff and students to work together in creating more effective and engaging learning environments. A teaching effectiveness framework, developed by Sharon Friesen of The Galileo Education Network, provides support for this process by advancing a new set of ideas about teaching for intellectual engagement.

***What did you do in school today?*** is grounded in a compelling set of beliefs about teaching and learning in Canadian middle and secondary schools and is designed to test these beliefs within a collaborative research and development model. The initiative advances these four contentions:

- Teaching practices exist that enable all students to achieve at high levels.
- Certain teaching practices and learning processes engage students in deeper and more sustained learning.
- The achievement gap could be narrowed, if not eliminated, by consistently using the teaching practices that we know are effective.
- Students have a better educational experience when teachers and students actively collaborate in the process of improvement.

### **A Summary of Year 1 Findings**

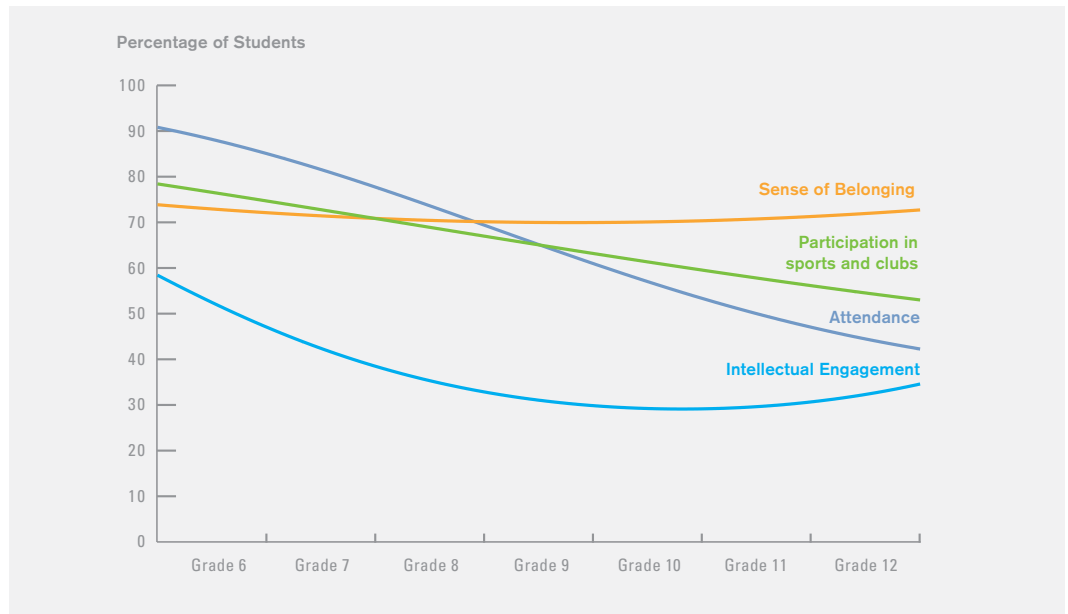
Using an expanded framework for thinking about student engagement, 93 schools in ten school districts invited just over 32,000 students to reflect on their experiences of social, academic and intellectual engagement through the ***What did you do in school today?*** student survey.

Results from districts participating in year one (2007-2008) make up the national sample, which was analyzed through the initiative's research framework.

### **Are Canadian Youth Engaged at School?**

- Although many students are engaged at school, overall levels of social and academic engagement are quite low.
- Levels of intellectual engagement – which tap into students' sense of interest, feelings about the relevance of school work, and motivation to do well in class – are significantly lower than levels of social and academic engagement.
- Levels of student engagement decline steadily throughout the middle and secondary school grades. (see Figure 1)

**Figure 1.** Percentages of students with a positive sense of belonging in Grades 6 through 12



*Although assessing proximal goals such as increasing attendance and reducing dropout rates can mark progress that reassures us we are moving in the right direction, ultimately we need to achieve the more ambitious goal of promoting deep cognitive engagement that results in learning. (American National Research Council, 2003, 32)*

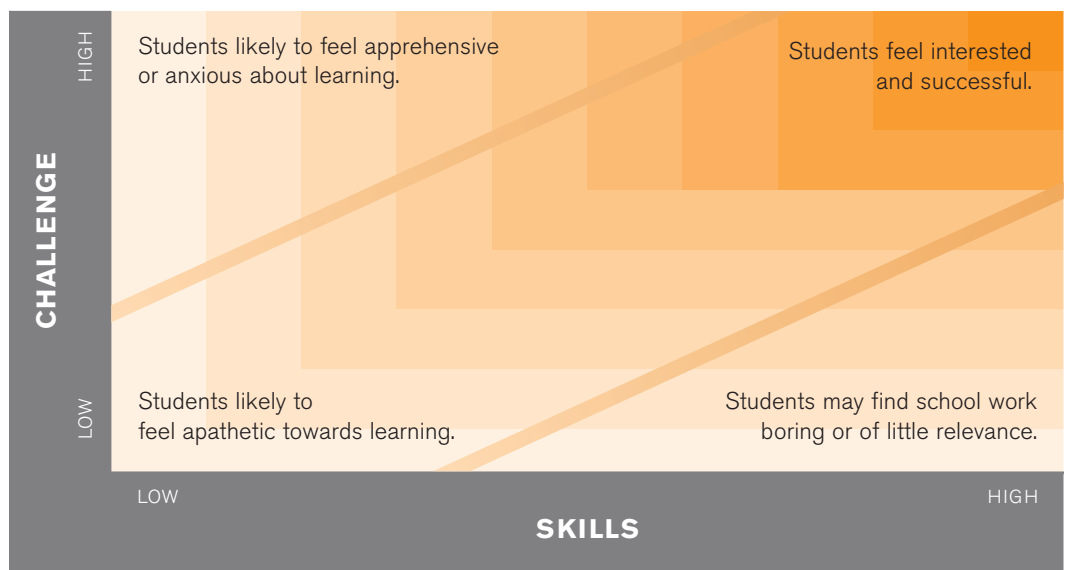
### Do Schools Make a Difference?

- Differences among schools in their levels of student engagement have less to do with students' family background than they do with school policies and practices.
- Between fifty and seventy percent of the differences in levels of engagement among the 93 participating schools is a result of school and classroom climate factors.

### Does Instructional Challenge Make a Difference?

- **What did you do in school today?** makes a unique contribution to the concept of student engagement by introducing instructional challenge (i.e., the extent to which students feel the work they are asked to do is challenging and the confidence they have in the skills required to carry out the work) as both a classroom-level and individual student-level measure of engagement. Based on Csikszentmihalyi's theory of Flow (1991), this measure explores four general relationships between skills and instructional challenge in students' experience of learning. (see Figure 2)

**Figure 2.** Instructional challenge



IF WE ARE GOING TO CHANGE HOW STUDENTS ARE ENGAGED, WE HAVE TO AGREE ON ONE THING ... WE MUST KEEP IT TO LEARNING... SOCIAL, ACADEMIC AND INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT. I THINK EVERYONE IS CAPABLE OF BALANCING ALL THREE. NOW WE ASK, HOW IS IT GOING TO WORK? (WILLIAM ZHANG, VANCOUVER, 2009)

- First-year findings demonstrate the importance of instructional challenge to differences among schools and its significant relationship to within-school differences in students' experiences of learning:
  - Less than 50 percent of Canadian middle and secondary school students feel both confident about their skills in language arts and mathematics and sufficiently challenged in their classes.
  - The relationship between instructional challenge and all three dimensions (social, academic and intellectual) of engagement is significant.

## TRANSFORMING CLASSROOMS

Schools across Canada face the challenges of understanding the nuances of student engagement in their own contexts and building new knowledge about the types of practices educators might start to cultivate to improve educational experiences and learning outcomes for all students. Teaching is incredibly complex and today's teachers are called upon to work with their colleagues to design learning environments that promote deeper engagement in learning as a reciprocal process among teachers and students.

In this context, *What did you do in school today?* introduces a three-dimensional framework of student engagement to think about the impact of curricular and instructional reforms. A clear and consistent focus on classroom and school practices that positively affect all dimensions is key to ensuring that far more students become effective learners.

*What did you do in school today?* is built on a shared commitment to imagining schools as places where all students experience success. A key part of this commitment includes CEA's ongoing work with Canadian school districts in generating new ideas and measures to strengthen the transformative potential of the initiative for teaching and learning.



Canadian Education Association

