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in conversation

Student Engagement: A Leadership Priority

An interview with J. Douglas Willms

I am very pleased to present this issue of *In Conversation*, particularly because it sheds light on one of the key drivers of student achievement that we now are beginning to appreciate and understand more fully.

We know that students who are engaged in the life of the school, engaged in their own learning, and engaged by what and how they are learning are far less likely to fall through the cracks. And so, as Doug points out in this conversation, we now see student engagement as a necessary condition for learning and achievement.

While that's true, according to Doug, engagement is also a critically important outcome in its own right. In fact, he suggests that the dimensions of engagement students develop at home and at school may be more important predictors of success in the workplace than academic achievement.

As leaders, we're constantly looking for the levers we can use to effect change and improvement. And so it seems to me that Doug's work on student engagement is opening up some very important doors – and putting a far more precise lens on why engagement matters, and how it interacts with other factors such as quality instruction, instructional time, and the learning context to promote student success.

I am also struck by the insights Doug offers on the ways in which we have traditionally addressed – or perhaps failed to address – that population of struggling learners who make up some 25 percent of the student population. If engaging those students is "not our job," as teachers or principals, Doug asks pointedly, then whose job is it?

Finally, and perhaps most exciting for all of us as leaders, Doug provides some concrete advice on the actions school leaders can take to directly influence the level of student engagement in the school and classroom.

Doug makes a compelling argument for viewing the development of student engagement as a leadership priority. Likewise, he puts specific tools in our hands to realize the promise of student engagement as a driver of school and student achievement.

You may find some of Doug's observations challenging and I invite you, as always, to use his comments as a springboard for your own reflection and professional dialogue. That is the spirit in which we publish *In Conversation*. I encourage you to explore these ideas with your colleagues to see how they can be applied in your contexts. I likewise encourage you to send your comments about this issue and about your own experiences and insights on student engagement to **InConversation@Ontario.ca**.

Kevin Costante
Deputy Minister of Education

ABOUT DOUGLAS WILLMS

Douglas Willms is a Professor and Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy at the University of New Brunswick (UNB). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a Fellow of the International Academy of Education, and a Member of the U.S. National Academy of Education.

Dr. Willms has published over two hundred research articles and monographs pertaining to youth literacy, children's health, the accountability of schooling systems, and the assessment of national reforms. He is the editor of *Vulnerable Children: Findings from Canada's National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth*, (University of Alberta Press, 2002) and the author of *Student Engagement at School: A Sense of Belonging and Participation* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2003) and *Monitoring School Performance: A Guide for Educators* (Falmer Press, 1992).

Dr. Willms played a lead role in developing the questionnaires for Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) and the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Recently, Dr. Willms and his colleagues designed the Early Years Evaluation (EYE), an instrument for the direct assessment of children's developmental skills at ages 3 to 6, and *Tell Them From Me*, an evaluation system for the continuous monitoring of school climate and student engagement and wellness.

Dr. Willms is known for his training of new investigators in the analysis of complex multilevel data. He regularly conducts workshops on multilevel modeling across Canada and throughout Asia, Europe and Latin America. Dr. Willms' current interests include the examination of family, school and community factors that contribute to the health and well-being of children and adolescents, and the use of continuous monitoring for evaluating school reforms.

Your work on student engagement has spanned a decade. What drew you to this work initially?

In fact, it started more than ten years ago when I was working with a small group that developed the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) PISA study. At that time, I wanted to get some non-cognitive outcomes into PISA. We know that learning is a function of the quality of instruction, but it also requires emotional and intellectual engagement on the part of students.

It is difficult to convince organizations like the OECD to move beyond the assessment of cognitive outcomes, but we were successful in getting a few measures of student engagement included in PISA – students' sense of belonging and truancy. The OECD later commissioned me to conduct a study that compared levels of student engagement across countries.

That was part of my interest. The other part comes from a growing body of research that has been looking at the role of non-cognitive outcomes – engagement would be one of them – things like motivation, social skills, the ability to meet people or to make positive friendships, the ability to work with others, showing up to work on time.

That research is demonstrating that non-cognitive skills may be more important in the workplace than academic achievement. In fact, if you look at economic studies, variation in earnings, variation in people's opportunities for employment and so on, it is those social skills that play an equal or even stronger role than high school or university marks.

INSIGHT

What is PISA?

PISA refers to the Programme for International Student Assessment conducted by the OECD that measures the knowledge, skills and other characteristics of 15-year-olds in the principal industrialised countries around the world. PISA assesses literacy in reading, mathematics, and science, and also asks students about their attitudes and approaches to learning. It was established in 2000 and is conducted every three years. Visit **www.oecd.org/edu/pisa/2009** for the most recent PISA survey which focused on reading and also assessed mathematics and science performance.

DIGGING DEEPER

Willms' study from 2003, *Student Engagement at School: A Sense of Belonging and Participation*, looks at what PISA 2000 found out about the level of school engagement for 15-year-old students. Specifically, it examined two measures:

- students' sense of belonging in terms of whether they feel they fit in at school, and
- students' participation in terms of their school and class attendance.

To access the full report visit **www.oecd.org**.

So this is the sense in which you suggest that we need to view engagement not only as a support for student achievement, but also as an important outcome in and of itself?

Yes. Traditionally, people have looked at engagement as a strategy to improve learning. So we've said "let's step on the accelerator to improve kids' engagement, so they'll get better marks or better math skills, better literacy skills." Or, similarly, people in the past have focused on self-esteem and put into place interventions to improve students' self-esteem, based on the assumption it would improve their learning outcomes.

But in fact, having good self-esteem, having a positive self-image, having good social skills, being engaged in what you're doing, these are important in their own right.

Engagement, for me, is a long-term disposition towards learning – viewing learning as fun, seeing it as important, seeing the value of working with and functioning as part of a team, being part of a social institution. To me, those are critically important lifelong skills.

DIGGING DEEPER

In his 2010 article, 'School Composition and Contextual Effects on Student Outcomes', Willms uses data from the 2006 PISA to examine the relationship between students' science performance and socio-economic status (SES) at the student and school levels. In this paper, Willms addresses the central question of "How can we raise and level the learning bar?"

INSIGHT

In *What Did You Do in School Today?* Willms, Friesen and Milton (2009) identify three dimensions of student engagement:

- **Social Engagement:** A sense of belonging and participation in school life
- **Academic or Institutional 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.

The authors of this report point out that "students are likely to experience social, academic and intellectual engagement at different times and at varying degrees of intensity in their day-to-day lives at school. They may be deeply interested in the work in some classes and bored in others. They may have little time for extracurricular activities because of their part-time jobs. Some will find caring relationships with adults at school; others may depend entirely on peer friendships. The complex relational and organizational aspects of school have a powerful and important impact on all forms of engagement."

How do we recognize an engaged student? What does engagement look like on the ground?

Well, we've divided the concept into three components: social engagement, academic or institutional engagement and intellectual engagement. The previous literature in this area has mainly focused on the social and the institutional pieces. Social engagement involves participation in extracurricular activities and other school activities. It's about having a strong sense of belonging at school – engaged students are participating in sports, they're developing social skills and making positive friendships. Institutional engagement is about showing up for school on time, not being truant and so on. Institutionally engaged students value schooling outcomes; they know it's important to their long term future; they seldom skip classes; they do their homework. However, that does not necessarily mean they love school, or have a deep psychological investment in their learning.

That's where the third aspect of engagement comes in – intellectual engagement – which is characterized by students putting in extra effort in their studies and being motivated to learn. That piece goes hand in hand with quality instruction. The teachers are interacting with that positive effort and motivation on the part of students, providing really effective learning time, and having relevant, exciting instruction in the classroom.

So an engaged student is not only engaged socially and institutionally, but also intellectually.

You've mentioned the interaction between engagement and quality instruction, but you also talk about two other inter-related factors: enabling context and time. What do you mean when you talk about an enabling context?

Well, the first point I should make is that when you look at the variation in student outcomes, whether that's engagement or academic achievement, there's more variation among schools within school districts than there is among districts. There's even more variation among classrooms within schools than there is among schools. And so if you think about children's experiences as they make their way through the school system, it matters more which teachers they have from year to year than which school they attend.

So in thinking about an enabling context, you need to focus first of all on the classroom. The three factors we've measured in numerous school effectiveness studies over the years – which also happen to be important drivers of student engagement – are teacher-student relations, high expectations for success and a positive disciplinary climate.

INSIGHT

Socio-economic status (SES) is a sociological term that refers to the relative position of a family or individual in a hierarchical social structure based on their access to, or control over wealth, prestige and power.

Mueller and Parcel 1981

When I use the term disciplinary climate, by the way, I don't mean a harsh or rigid discipline. It means that students know what the expectations are, they know what the rules of the game are, they know what happens when they step out of bounds and what happens when they're within bounds. Establishing that kind of a context in the classroom and school is fundamentally important.

The other thing I would say about this – and this has really been the basis of my research from the beginning, thirty years ago – can be summarized by a single question: If you have a child of average family background and average ability, is that child going to be better off going to a high-ability, high socio-economic status school, where he or she is a small fish in a big pond, or is the child better off going to a low socio-economic status school and low-ability school, where he or she will be a big fish in a small pond?

The answer, unequivocally, is that it is better to expose students to the high social class, high ability context. What happens when you separate students by social class or by ability is this: students from poor backgrounds and those that are struggling academically, do considerably worse, while those with high ability, or from a higher socio-economic background, do slightly better, but not much.

DIGGING DEEPER

In *Vulnerable Children*, Willms (2002) makes this distinction between vulnerable and at-risk children:

- A risk factor refers to a factor that precedes and is predictive of an undesirable life outcome. Children living in poverty could be considered "at risk."
- "Vulnerable" connotes susceptibility – that one is "exposed" or liable to experience some undesirable life outcome in the future. For example, children who display poor cognitive and behavioural outcomes during their early years are vulnerable to unemployment and poor physical and mental health as young adults.

The distinction is important as it calls for consideration of "leading indicators" of children's outcomes, such as those measured with the *Early Years Evaluation* (EYE).

DIGGING DEEPER

In *Learning Divides: Ten Policy Questions about the Performance and Equity of Schools and Schooling Systems*, a report prepared for the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Willms (2006) demonstrates a useful analytical tool called the "gradient" which represents the relationship between student learning outcomes and socio-economic status (SES). Willms not only explores key policy questions relevant to the educational performance of schools and schooling systems but also shows how the gradient framework can be used to assess the likely effects of different policy interventions to reduce inequalities.

So what does that mean on the ground?

It means that if you have about a quarter of your students who are vulnerable – not able to read well, for example – the typical teacher should have six or seven of these children in his or her classroom. In a segregated system, you'll have some teachers with only one or two vulnerable students, and other teachers with 10, 14, or even 18 children in a class of 30. That is well beyond the tipping point, and so these students fare much worse than they would do in an inclusive setting.

We have some good examples now, where school systems have deliberately made an effort to de-segregate. They have a better mix of students, with those who are vulnerable more equally distributed across classrooms and schools. Those school systems do better. The research from the PISA study, across 30 countries, also found a strong positive effect associated with inclusion. The more inclusive the system is, the better everyone does.

That seems intuitive, that students will rise to the environment they find themselves in.

Exactly. It's intuitive. And yet, there's pressure for segregation that comes from many well-to-do families who want to separate their children from those who are less able. You can see that pressure with French immersion programs, special programs for the gifted, and so on. Parents naturally want to do what is best for their child, but there is also a social good to be achieved here. The challenge is getting parents to see that their child will learn at just as fast a pace in an inclusive school.

We see this in sports every day. In hockey, for example, selections are made at a very young age – as early as 8 or 9 – with the more able players creamed off into select teams. There's still hockey for all children at that age, of course, but the kids who aren't selected into the top teams fall by the wayside, very quickly, until you have only a select group playing hockey. Our data show that there is a very dramatic decline during the middle and secondary school years in kids' participation in sports.

INSIGHT

Schatschneider and his colleagues (2004) argue that sixty years of research have not resolved questions of what constructs assessed in kindergarten best predict subsequent reading outcomes.

In 'Kindergarten Prediction of Reading Skills: A Longitudinal Comparative Analysis' these researchers report on their study that assessed the relative importance of multiple measures obtained in a kindergarten sample for the prediction of reading outcomes at the end of 1st and 2nd grades.

Their analysis revealed that measures for phonological awareness, letter sound knowledge, and naming speed consistently accounted for the unique variance across reading outcomes whereas measures of perceptual skills and oral language and vocabulary did not.

You also talk about instructional time as a key factor. How does instructional time play into student engagement?

Well, one of the big aspects of engagement is that students need to learn to read well in the first three years of school. After Grade 3, the focus shifts from instruction dedicated to "learning to read," to instruction about "reading to learn."

In other words, after Grade 3, students are expected to be able to read subject-matter content. Those who have not learned to read well by the end of Grade 3, almost without exception, end up on very slow learning trajectories. These are the

DIGGING DEEPER

In 'Using Early Literacy Monitoring to Prevent Reading Failure' Sloat, Beswick, and Willms (2007) argue that "children need to become capable and confident readers by the end of second grade." Educators need to keep close tabs on children's development of this crucial skill.

children who are prone to becoming disaffected or disengaged from school. Imagine the psychological toll of going to school every day and not being able to read well.

So the time consideration is this: there's a certain amount of instructional time available in a school day. If you want to be sure you do not have 25 percent of students falling through the cracks by the end of Grade 3, you need to make sure these children are getting the instructional time they need. These students, the bottom 25 percent need direct instruction in phonics. Some of them have good language skills, so once they learn to decode words, their reading skills develop quickly.

The leading researchers in the field say it requires about 100 to 150 hours of augmented instruction – instruction over and above what these students receive in the regular classroom. Unless these students get that learning time, you're going to continue to have vulnerability rates of 25 to 30 percent.

DIGGING DEEPER

Refer to Heckman's (2008) report to the National Bureau of Economic Research, 'Schools, Skills and Synapses' to learn more about:

- practical issues in the design and implementation of early childhood programs
- the role of cognitive and non-cognitive ability in shaping adult outcomes
- the early emergence of differentials in abilities between children of advantaged families and children of disadvantaged families
- the role of families in creating these abilities
- adverse trends in American families, and
- the effectiveness of early interventions in offsetting these trends.

These three factors then – engagement, instructional time, and quality of instruction are mutually reinforcing.

Yes, and when I describe that relationship I say it's not "this factor plus that factor" but rather it's "this factor times that factor." These factors interact. If you have great instruction but do not have enough learning time, for example, then students will not be on a fast learning trajectory, and they will not be engaged.

And so, as much as I want engagement to stand out as an outcome in its own right, it really can't be separated from learning. As the Nobel Laureate economist James Heckman says, "Skills beget skills." There is a back and forth process as children are going through school in which they develop social skills and motivation; that begets academic achievement and academic achievement begets more motivation and social skills. Engagement and learning go hand in hand.

DIGGING DEEPER

Tell Them From Me (TTFM) is an online school evaluation system, developed by Willms and colleague Patrick Flanagan at the University of New Brunswick. The system provides a means for the continuous monitoring of student outcomes and schooling processes based on the best evidence from numerous studies on school effectiveness. A unique feature of *TTFM* is that it furnishes continuous feedback for an extensive set of school indicators that are directly linked to school policy and practice. The evaluation focuses on each school's own progress, rather than on differences among schools.

The student survey is designed to assess student engagement and health and wellness, and ten of the classroom and school "drivers" of student success. The survey offers a unique window into the perceptions and opinions of students.

The power of *TTFM* lies in the ability to survey groups of students over time and to compare information from school reports with similar schools across Canada and with students of similar backgrounds to our own.

So when we talk about engagement, we can't view it as an overlay. You know, it's like having a group of employees and saying "Now we are going to teach everyone how to become engaged as employees." It is not that easy. Children grow into becoming engaged learners.

When you look at the numbers, where are we in terms of the prevalence of students who have lower engagement?

In Canada we have anywhere between 25 to 30 percent of students not completing secondary school on time. These students typify the disengaged student. We don't call them dropouts anymore; we call them "fade-outs" or "push-outs." They fade out of school as they become increasingly disengaged, or they are pushed out through various selection processes.

We can measure social, institutional and intellectual engagement, but we have to establish some criteria that distinguish engaged from disengaged students. In other words, at what point to do you say "this score on our measure represents an engaged student and this score represents a disengaged student." It's the same with measuring anxiety or depression – there is a steady continuum between not being depressed through to very severe depression, so researchers set a cut point on the depression scale in order to say "this person is depressed and this person is not depressed."

INSIGHT

Tell Them From Me (TTFM) asks one standard open-ended question for all students that participate: "Please tell us about some of the things you really like about your school, or things that would make it even better."

When we set these criteria, we find that about 25 to 30 percent of students are disengaged. Now we could change the criteria and the percentage of disengaged students would be lower or higher. But I think 25 to 30 percent is an accurate figure because it corresponds to the percentage of youth who fade out or are pushed out of school during the secondary school years.

No matter where we set the cut point to define low engagement, if we apply the same criteria across school jurisdictions we can make valid comparisons among jurisdictions. This is when it is the most telling. It allows one to say, "This school has 90 percent of its students engaged while this one has only 60 percent engaged." There is clearly something different about the way these two schools operate.

And that's what we've been doing – we're giving feedback to schools on their levels of engagement, compared to a standard that is set nationally.

Another point I would make is that we need to shift our thinking about the meaning of a "norm." In each province, we can establish provincial or national norms. But the question I have is "What do you want out of the norm?" The norm is typically a provincial or national average – but is that the right norm? For example, if we have 60 percent of youth participating in clubs and sports, and that's the norm, we need to ask ourselves, "Is that good enough?" and "Why couldn't we have a standard that calls for every single student to be participating in at least one school club or sport all the way through school?"

So for many aspects of engagement, a school could adopt 100 percent as the standard, and not worry about averages. For example, when considering findings from *Tell Them From Me*, school staff might conclude, "Well, 70 percent of our students are confident in making positive friendships at school and that's right on the national average; we're doing all right." But why not teach that as a skill? This is such an important life skill, so why not aim for 100 percent?

Can those skills be taught?

Absolutely. There are many strategies available for teaching these skills, but not all of our teachers feel they were equipped during their teacher training to teach those skills.

DIGGING DEEPER

Refer to *The Effects of Advisory Groups on Student Engagement*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Brunswick to learn more about the findings of Dr. Elizabeth Costa's (2010) study.

Dr. Elizabeth Costa recently completed a study in Prince Edward Island in which student advisory groups were introduced in a number of schools. Teachers were taught the theories and teaching strategies associated with student advisory groups. In most schools, teachers had a group of students for 30 minutes during the first period, and gave students the opportunity to learn social skills. Frankly, it met with mixed reaction. Some teachers embraced it and were very good at it. Other teachers thought it was foisted on them and they weren't interested in it, and some teachers felt they just didn't have adequate training to teach social skills.

You've spoken about language skills. We can presumably see the same sort of trajectory in terms of numeracy skills.

Yes. Children who cannot read well by the end of Grade 3 might have kept up with their peers in their math skills up to that point. But if they are not reading well by then, there is very little growth in their math skills after Grade 3. This is because after Grade 3, mathematics involves more problem solving – students need to be able to pull two or three pieces of information from unfamiliar text, make connections among those pieces of information, and make inferences about the facts to solve problems. In fact, while there are some children who love math and not language arts and vice versa, there is actually a much higher correlation between the two than many people would think.

INSIGHT

Willms (2003) found that for OECD countries the correlation between reading and mathematics literacy level was 0.71 at the student level.

Where are we now in terms of knowing how to effect changes in student engagement? Do we have a handle on that?

Engagement hasn't really been taken on much as a topic in and of itself. I'm excited by the Canadian Education Association's study that has engaged Galileo to work with school staff to improve intellectual engagement. But we do not have a fully developed intervention. That is, we can't say "If you only did this, engagement would improve." We know some pieces of the puzzle. We know that children who have an advocate at school – someone looking out for them, checking in with them every day, helping them plan for the future – we know that's effective.

What we need to tackle now are some of the big structural features of schools. For example, at the middle and secondary levels, we are tied to the model of subject-based curricula with 45-50 minute periods. We might ask, "What if you had a school year in which kids were there just to boost their literacy and numeracy skills, and then went on to a subject-based curricula – what would that look like?" This would need to be a program for all students, not just those who are struggling readers.

INSIGHT

Through *What Did You Do in School Today?* (Willms et al, 2009), the Canadian Education Association, working in partnership with the Galileo Education Network, The Learning Bar Inc. and several school districts across Canada, is bringing life to the idea of student engagement in the classroom and exploring its powerful relationship with adolescent learning, student achievement and effective teaching.

DIGGING DEEPER

The *High School Flexibility Enhancement Project* is an exciting project involving sixteen high schools across Alberta. The four-year project is providing participating schools with the opportunity to organize their schools without the current restriction of 25 hours of face-to-face instruction per course credit. The project is evaluating its effects on student engagement with *Tell Them From Me*.

There's a project in Alberta in which they've abandoned the school timetable. That opens up all kinds of opportunities. For example, students can have a language arts project that brings cross-curricular teaching of math and science to their language arts class. Students can be engaged for a full morning, instead of going from class to class all morning in blocks of 45 minutes. To me, that would be a much more exciting place to learn.

DIGGING DEEPER

Learn more about the "contributions of the home" in *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-analyses Relating to Achievement* by John Hattie (2008) and their implications for teaching, learning and leadership. Among the findings in this ground-breaking book is substantiation of the claim that "across all home variables, parental aspirations and expectations for children's educational achievement has the strongest relationship with achievement."

Parents clearly have a major influence here. What have you observed about the role of parents in building their children's engagement in school?

Well, parents are the "sine qua non." And it starts early, with reading to the child for example, that's essential. We have used our *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth* to explore this. When we look at the various ways parents engage with their child – playing board games, going to the park, for example – reading to the child, by far, outweighs all of the other factors. So that's the first part – engaging in family activities is fundamental. It's too easy now for children to play video games and watch TV.

INSIGHT

Ontario's *Parent Engagement Policy* is grounded in a vision of parents that acknowledges their importance both as valued partners and as active participants in their children's education. Its purpose is to provide the supports needed to connect parents at the local level and to help ensure that they have the skills, knowledge and tools they need to engage fully in their children's education and in the life of their schools.

Visit **ontario.ca/EDUparents** to learn more.

When researchers have considered parenting skills, as they're associated with children developing engagement and literacy skills, they identified two key factors. There is "responsiveness" – what I call the love factor – where parents are loving to their child and responsive to their needs. There is also a factor referred to in the literature as "demandingness." It means having clear expectations about what children are allowed to do and not allowed to do. Effective parenting involves achieving the right balance between "responsiveness" and "demandingness."

Achieving this balance makes room for doing activities in the home that are associated with engagement at school. Researchers have looked at the importance of family dinners and find that children are more engaged when there's a regular family dinner. Parents create an opportunity – the evening dinner with "table talk" asking, "What do you think about this issue?" "What's happening in the news?" "What's happening with your friends at school?" These conversations get children engaged.

This extends into secondary school. A few studies have suggested that peers become more important than parents in the socialization of children after they begin their high school years. I disagree. Parent engagement is still all-important. It requires setting high expectations, helping children plan, helping them acquire skills for making friendships. For many youth, these skills need to be taught. They need to be taught at school and they need to be taught at home.

INSIGHT

Indicators and evidence in Ontario's *K-12 School Effectiveness Framework* promote active and independent engagement of students in the learning process. For example:

- Students set goals and make informed decisions about pathways, options and programs
- Teachers and students are co-creators of the learning environment in the classroom and school
- Students have a voice in the process of identifying what helps their learning and well-being and the learning and well-being of others.

These indicators and samples of evidence can be used to assess the level of student engagement.

DIGGING DEEPER

Ontario's *Student Voice Initiative* has as its goal "that every K to 12 school in the province has an explicit student voice strategy that seeks and responds to students' ideas on what engages them in their learning." Three key components of the initiative are:

- Minister's Student Advisory Council
- *SpeakUp* Projects
- Regional Student Forums.

Visit **ontario.ca/speakup** to learn more.

INSIGHT

Over 1500 students who participated in 20 regional student forums across the province had their say about what strengthens student engagement.

A school that engages students and ensures all voices are heard would:

1. Have activities outside the classroom
2. Help students learn life skills
3. Offer a socially inclusive environment
4. Be an academically inclusive environment
5. Empower students to speak their mind
6. Allow students to give feedback on learning experiences
7. Keep students informed
8. Provide a high-quality education
9. Encourage eco-friendly practices

More information is available at:
www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/students/speakup/9IndicatorsEn.pdf

What are the implications for schools? How can we use this information to inform school leadership?
Well, the first thing I would say is that most of the research in this area has been concerned with identifying the risk and protective factors associated with vulnerability. It has yielded a long list of factors; for example, youth are more prone to be disengaged if they come from poor families or single parent families, if their parents are unemployed, or if they live in a poor neighbourhood. I could give you a long list. But these are not factors that school staff can do much about.

A more fruitful way to look at this is in terms of the actual numbers of disengaged students. Among those who are disengaged, they tend to fall into three categories. Some students are just simply disengaged, but their academic results and behaviour are fine. Then you have students who have low academic achievement and are disengaged – and that's why I stress the importance of reading skills. Finally, you have the "bad actors" – those with behaviour problems. The majority of these youth have low academic achievement as well as being disengaged from school.

So in a school with say, 500 students, you may have 125 students that are disengaged. These are the students the principal and all teachers in the school need to know well. They need to make sure there is someone checking in with them every day. And this is also where you can build in parent involvement – meeting with the parents and helping them plan and set goals. Parents, after all, want good outcomes for their children, but some do not know quite how to go about it. Some of them may have been disengaged students themselves, or they may have low literacy skills. These parents may not feel they can sit down with their child to help with homework or school projects. But there are many things they can do.

If you have 125 disengaged students in your school, these are the ones you have to reach. And you cannot say it is not the teacher's job or it is not the principal's job. If engaging these students is not their job, then whose job is it? If they fail to do it, then these students will most likely fade out of school.

How can school leaders, then, support teachers in addressing student engagement?
Well, at the risk of harping on this, the first thing I'd say is that we have to develop a more inclusive system. If you are a teacher and have 15 or 20 students in a class of 30 that are disengaged, that's a much different proposition than having six or seven. Imagine how thoroughly exhausting it would be to go to school every day, facing a classroom with 15 or 20 vulnerable students and knowing you cannot hope to meet their needs. We must support inclusion at every turn.

A number of school districts are using the *Early Years Evaluation* to assess children's developmental skills as they enter kindergarten. This tool gives teachers and principals accurate information about the skills of every student. When we began we worried that schools might use the data to separate the most able children from their less able classmates. However, we have found that many schools are using the results to ensure that the mix of abilities is more equal across classes. This is great as it helps students start school with an inclusive approach.

The second thing I'd say is that you need to select teachers well. Teachers are often selected on the basis of strong university marks, their presentation skills, or their ability to prepare an effective lesson plan. These factors are important, but in my view you also need teachers that can teach in inclusive schools: teachers who are resilient, teachers who have good leadership skills, teachers who have been on *Outward Bound* courses or have travelled extensively, and especially teachers who have a positive attitude towards inclusion. That's what I would focus on. You can't select teachers just because you think they're going to be good chemistry or math teachers.

To what degree can students effect positive change in regard to engagement? Does strong student voice have a role to play?
Well, I'd say two things about this. First, engagement requires that students know they've been heard, that their voice matters. We have found that when we ask students for their input about the school, they ask us in return, "Why do you collect this data – what do you ever do with it?"

DIGGING DEEPER

"Nobody stays in school because of Algebra 2."

Chauncey and Walser (2009), editors of *Spotlight on Student Engagement, Motivation, and Achievement* use the above chance remark by an educator to introduce this book to illustrate an essential truth about what keeps students in school. This volume is one of five in the *Harvard Education Letter Spotlight series* that brings together 15 articles to examine research and practice that describe efforts to create conditions where students are actively engaged in the learning process.

INSIGHT

The Early Years Evaluation (EYE) is designed to assist educators in assessing the developmental skills of children as they prepare for and make the transition to school. The EYE provides accurate reporting that helps teachers organize their instruction, increase learning time and monitor each child's progress. Results from the evaluation are also available to parents to inform them about their child's progress. For more information about the EYE visit: **www.earlyyearsevaluation.com**.

There are over 1000 schools across Canada using the *Tell Them From Me* evaluation system. One of the schools in Saskatchewan installed a video screen at the school entrance, and uses it to respond to student concerns. For example, one morning message was: "We asked you 'What are some things you really like about your school and some things that would make it even better?' You said 'We appreciate the time teachers spend with our sports teams after school.' We say, 'Take the time to thank these teachers'." This approach – "we asked," "you said," "we say" – is now being pursued by several schools across Canada. Students clearly see that they have been heard and that their ideas have been considered.

The second lesson from *Tell Them From Me* is that students initially respond to issues that can seem trivial to school staff. But students have had so little

experience voicing their views that unless they have some guidance they are not going to tackle some of the big issues relevant to their school experience. That is a much bigger challenge. Exercising "student voice" is something we need to teach as well. It is another social skill that's part of student engagement.

DIGGING DEEPER

Carolyn Riehl's (2000) perceptive article 'The Principal's Role in Creating Inclusive Schools for Diverse Students' argues that "inclusive administrative practice is rooted in values of equity and social justice; it requires administrators to bring their full subjectivities to bear on their practice, and it implicates language as a key mechanism for both oppression and transformation."

You've developed a set of specific recommendations for principals in regard to building student engagement, and we intend to feature those along with this conversation. But what umbrella comments or advice would you have for principals who want to improve their practice and effect change for students?

The single most important piece of advice I'd give is to embrace the philosophy and ideal of an inclusive school. And that would include building a framework of understanding among school staff that says "this is the philosophy of an inclusive school – this is what an inclusive school looks like."

INSIGHT

Seven key actions Doug encourages us to consider:

- Monitor student engagement
- Identify advocates for disengaged students
- Help students become engaged in the life of the school
- Identify necessary interventions for improving literacy skills
- Check in daily with students who exhibit behaviour problems
- Deal effectively with bullying, exclusion and sexual harassment
- Help at-risk students develop emotional resilience

An inclusive school is one where children learn how to make positive friendships. They learn what bullying means and doesn't mean. They learn about including others.

Finally, we need to address inclusion at the system level as well; it is not only an issue at the school level. We need to take steps to ensure that we have inclusive schools and an inclusive school system. It comes down to refusing to accept the "status quo" – do we really need to accept the fact that one-quarter of Canadian students are disengaged?

INSIGHT

Realizing the Promise of Diversity: Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009) sets out the vision for an equitable and inclusive education system in which:

- all students, parents and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected;
- every student is supported and inspired to succeed in a culture of high expectations for learning.

Visit **www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/policyfunding/equity.html** to learn more.

What are your thoughts on the ideas presented in this issue of *In Conversation*? Email your comments and insights to InConversation@ontario.ca.