Students in *Mortlach School*
Student Engagement – Primary (2016/2017)

The Learning Bar

Student engagement is "a disposition towards learning, working with others, and functioning in a social institution".[1] It includes students' sense of belonging at school, the extent to which they value schooling outcomes, and their psychological investment in learning. Measures of these aspects of engagement can be classified as social engagement, institutional engagement, and intellectual engagement. Engagement and learning go hand-in-hand: engagement begets learning and learning begets engagement. This dynamic and interactive process begins early – during the primary years or even earlier – and continues through to adulthood. Student engagement needs to be considered an important schooling outcome in its own right, sitting alongside academic achievement as a key measure of student success.

Key Findings from the Research

- The average levels of the three types of engagement tend to be quite stable during the primary school years. However, student engagement declines steadily as students proceed through middle and secondary school.

- At the primary level, teachers need to be aware of early signs of disengagement. Students who are prone to becoming disengaged tend to have a low sense of belonging at school, display poor social behaviours, and lack interest in their school work.

- Students who are intellectually engaged are more likely to feel confident in their skills and challenged in their classes. Students who lack confidence in their skills are more than one-and-a-half times as likely to suffer anxiety problems during middle and secondary school.[2]

- Aboriginal students and students from low socioeconomic families are less likely to be engaged at school. Immigrant students tend to be more engaged than non-immigrant students on measures of institutional and intellectual engagement, but this is not the case for measures of social engagement. Girls have slightly higher levels of engagement than boys.

- Schools vary in their levels of engagement, even after taking account of the family background of students attending each school. Some of this variation is attributable to five "drivers of student outcomes": quality instruction, teacher-student relations, classroom learning climate, expectations for success, and student advocacy.[3] However, there is less variation among primary schools than among secondary schools.

- Data from students can help school staff develop policies and practices that increase student engagement.

Students from Mortlach School completed the *OurSCHOOL* survey which included nine measures of student engagement alongside the five drivers of student outcomes. This report summarizes the results.

1. A Framework for Assessing Student Engagement

The *OurSCHOOL* Primary School Survey includes nine measures of student engagement, categorised as social, institutional and intellectual engagement (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Measures of student engagement in *OurSCHOOL***

Social Engagement	Institutional Engagement	Intellectual Engagement
Sense of Belonging at School	Values Schooling Outcomes	Interest and Motivation
Participation in Sports and Clubs	Positive School Behaviour	Effort
Positive Relationships at School	Positive Homework Behaviour	Quality Instruction

For each aspect of engagement, students were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements, such as "I get along well with others at school." Their scores were scaled on a 10-point scale, and students with scores above 6.0 (i.e., a mild to moderately favourable view) were considered engaged. Similar criteria were established for participation in sports and clubs and positive school behaviour.

2. Social Engagement

Students who are *socially* engaged are actively involved in the life of the school; their friends are there and they are involved in sports or other extra-curricular activities. This involvement can give them a sense of belonging at school and increase academic motivation.[5] Figure 2 shows the percentage of students in Mortlach School that were socially engaged compared with national norms for students at the year levels assessed in this school.

Figure 2: Percentage of students socially engaged at Mortlach School
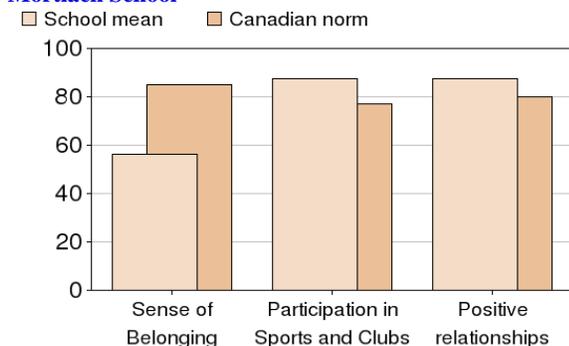
3. Institutional Engagement

Students who value schooling outcomes and meet the formal rules of schooling are considered *institutionally* engaged. These students feel that what they are learning at school is directly related to their long-term success, and this view is reflected in their classroom and school behaviour and their effort in doing homework. Levels of institutional engagement in Mortlach School are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Percentage of students institutionally engaged at Mortlach School
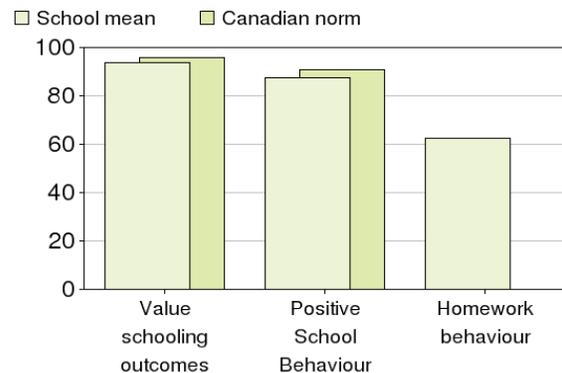
4. Intellectual Engagement

Some students meet the institutional demands of school, but they are not truly engaged in their learning. Intellectual engagement entails a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher-order thinking skills to increase understanding, solve complex problems, and construct new knowledge.[4] It is closely tied to the quality of instruction offered at school as there is an interaction between a teacher's approach to instruction and student motivation. Figure 4 displays the results for Mortlach School on the three measures of intellectual engagement.

Figure 4: Percentage of students intellectually engaged at Mortlach School
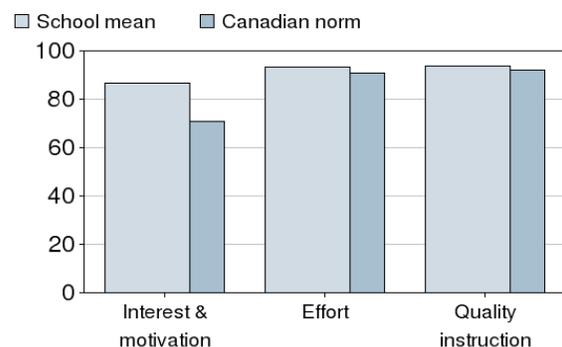
5. Early signs of disengagement

A small percentage of students display signs of disengagement during the primary school years. Some of these children exhibit intense anxiety or other psychological problems, which is sometimes characterised as "school phobia".[5] For most children however, early disengagement is associated with learning and behavioural problems which are evident in kindergarten or even earlier. Early disengagement is also associated with family socio-economic factors, and some analysts attribute it to factors associated with living in poverty as well as parenting styles and levels of parental involvement in their children's education. However, the school's role is increasingly being recognised as important.

A composite measure of student engagement derived from the nine *OurSCHOOL* measures of engagement can be used to discern the prevalence of students displaying early signs of disengagement. Figure 5 shows the prevalence in Mortlach School by year.

Figure 5: Percentage of students at Mortlach School displaying early signs of disengagement.
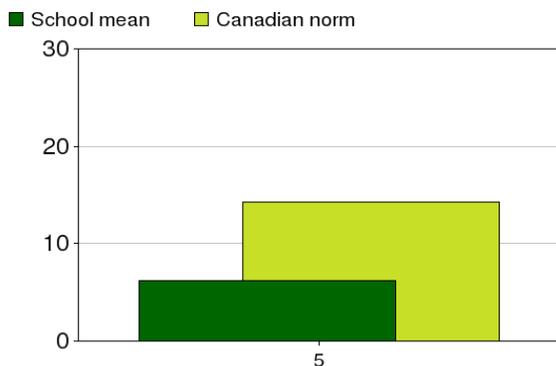
6. Equality of Engagement Outcomes

'Equality' refers to differences in social outcomes among sub-populations, such as differences between students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds. A measure of socioeconomic status (SES) was derived from students' reports of educational and cultural possessions in the home. Students were classified into three equal groups, which are referred to as low, middle, and high SES. Figure 6 shows the extent of inequalities among these socioeconomic groups in Mortlach School for the composite measure of engagement.

Figure 6: Extent of inequalities in student engagement among socioeconomic groups at Mortlach School
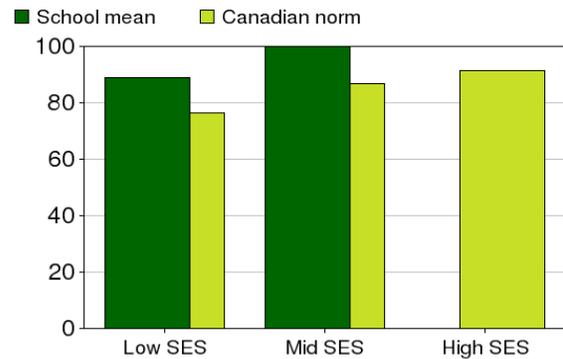
7. Drivers of Student Engagement

Research by The Learning Bar found that there were considerable differences among schools in their levels of engagement and only some of this variation was attributable to students' family backgrounds. Five school-level factors were consistently related to student engagement: quality instruction, teacher-student relations, classroom learning climate, teacher expectations for success, and student advocacy. Figure 7 shows the average scores on a ten-point scale for each factor for Mortlach School compared with national norms for students at the year levels assessed in this school.

Figure 7: School-levels factors associated with student engagement at Mortlach School
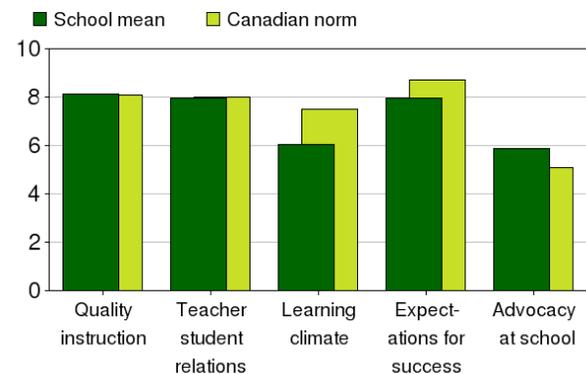
8. What Schools Can Do

First and foremost, all students need an advocate – someone at school who consistently provides encouragement and to whom they can turn to for advice. School staff need to identify the students showing early signs of disengagement and regularly monitor their progress. Someone on staff needs to check in with each of these students regularly, in some cases every day. Improving student engagement cannot be seen as solely the role of support personnel, such as counsellors or psychologists; it needs to be viewed as a key role of classroom teachers.

A substantial number of disengaged students have poor literacy skills. The majority of these students did not learn to read well during the first three years of primary school and by the fourth year they feel inadequate as learners at school. They need an intervention aimed at improving their basic reading and math skills. Some of these students are disruptive in class and disrespectful with others. These students need short- and long-term plans for school success guided by school staff. Many students need help in developing positive friendships and resolving conflicts in constructive ways.

A number of students who are disengaged suffer anxiety. The school can play a role in reducing anxiety by supporting programs designed to improve students' emotional resilience, by tackling issues concerning bullying and school safety, and by building effective family-school partnerships. These measures can dramatically improve levels of social and institutional engagement.

Increasing the intellectual engagement of students is perhaps more difficult to achieve as it requires a marked change in classroom practice. Educators will need to challenge and alter some of the long-standing structural features of schools, such as teaching arrangements, approaches to instruction, school and class schedules, the ways students are grouped for instruction, and assessment strategies.

About *OurSCHOOL*

OurSCHOOL is an evaluation system that includes a dynamic web-based student survey, and optional teacher and parent surveys. The system provides leading indicators of student engagement and wellness, and the aspects of classroom and school learning climate that research has shown affect student engagement and learning outcomes. Please see www.thelearningbar.com for further information.

About this School Report

This report was prepared by Dr. J. Douglas Willms, Director of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy at the University of New Brunswick. It was based on data from 16 students at Mortlach School that completed the *OurSCHOOL* student survey in 2016. Schools can print this report free of charge for use in staff meetings and professional development activities. It can also be reproduced for distribution to parents.

References:

1. **Willms, J.D.** (2003). *Student engagement at school: A sense of belonging and participation.* Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

2. **Tramonte, L.. & Willms, J. D.** (2010). The prevalence of anxiety among middle and secondary school students in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Public Health, 101*(Suppl. 3), S19-S22.

3. **Willms, J. D.** (2011). *Student engagement in Alberta schools.* Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education.

4. **Willms, J. D.**, Friesen, S. & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement* (First National Report). Toronto: Canadian Education Association.