Students in *Mortlach School*
Student Engagement (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 grades 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

- A study conducted by the Canadian Education Association, in collaboration with Galileo Educational Network and The Learning Bar, found that all three types of engagement markedly decline as students progress through middle and secondary school. For example, in Grade 6 about 60% of students were considered to be intellectually engaged, but by Grade 9 the percentage was about 30%.[2]

- 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.[3]

- Data from the *OurSCHOOL* survey in 2009-10 found that 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 higher levels of engagement than boys.

- Schools make a difference. There is considerable variation among schools 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.[4]

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

In Mortlach School, 24 students completed the *OurSCHOOL* survey which included ten 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* Effective Schools Survey includes nine measures of student engagement, categorized as social, institutional and intellectual engagement.

Social Engagement *Student is involved in the social life of the school*	Institutional Engagement *Student values and strives to meet the formal requirements for school success*	Intellectual Engagement *Student makes an emotional and psychological investment in learning*
Sense of Belonging at School	Values Schooling Outcomes	Interest and Motivation
Participation in Sports and Clubs	Attendance	Effort
	Positive Behaviour	
Positive Friendships at School	Homework and Study Habits	Appropriately Challenged

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 school attendance.

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. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in Mortlach School that were socially engaged compared with national norms for students at the grade levels assessed in this school.

Figure 1: Percentage of students socially engaged at Mortlach School
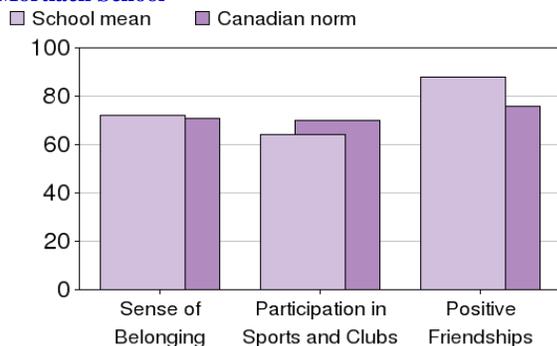
3. Institutional Engagement

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 school and class attendance and their effort in doing homework. Levels of institutional engagement in Mortlach School are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Percentage of students institutionally engaged at Mortlach School
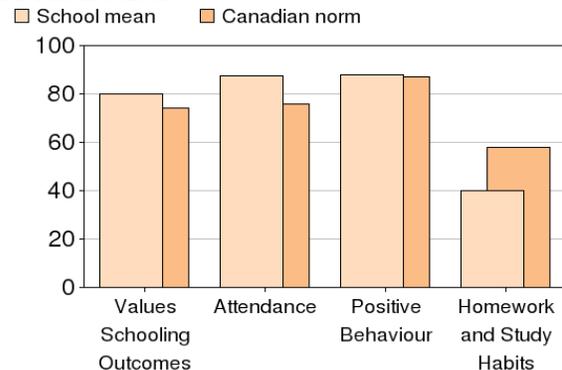
4. Intellectual Engagement

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.[2] Students are more engaged when their level of skills is consistent with the challenges presented to them in their classes.[5] These students are often deeply absorbed in academic activities. Figure 3 displays the results for Mortlach School on the three measures of intellectual engagement.
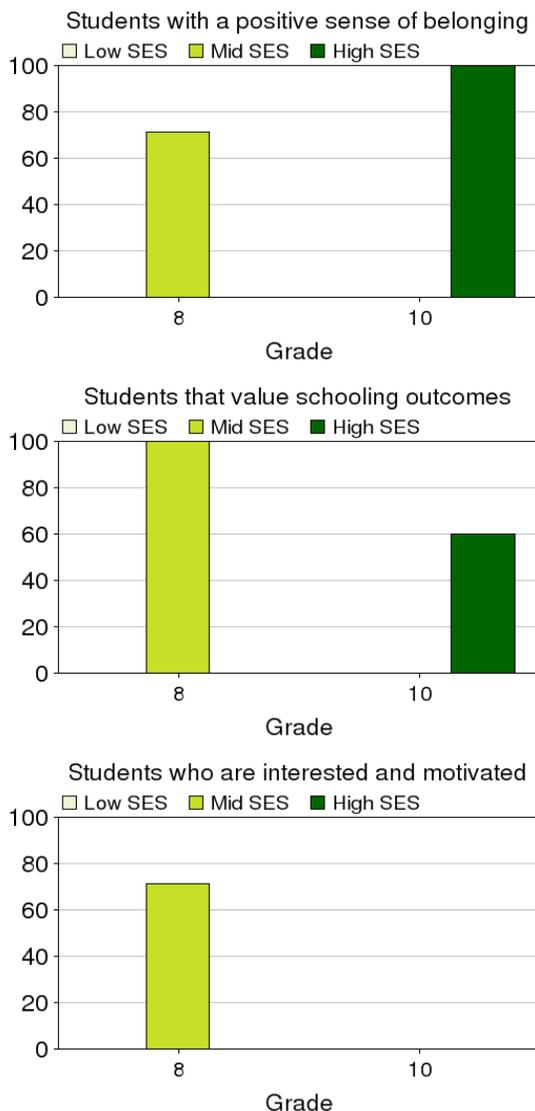
Figure 3: Percentage of students intellectually engaged at Mortlach School
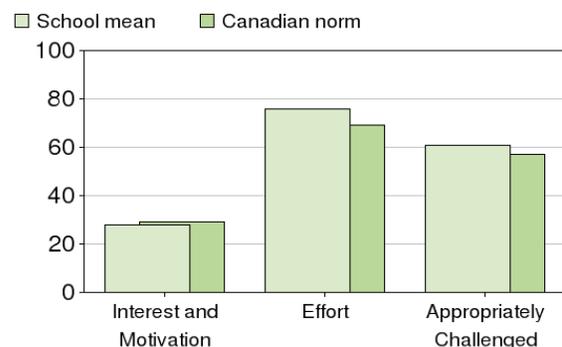
5. Equality of Engagement Outcomes

'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, their parents' level of education, and whether they were living in a two-parent family. Students were classified into three groups, which are referred to as low, middle, and high SES. Figure 4 shows the extent of equalities among these socioeconomic groups in Mortlach School for three measures of student engagement.

Figure 4: Extent of equalities in student engagement among socioeconomic groups at Mortlach School

Students with a positive sense of belonging
□ Low SES □ Mid SES ■ High SES

Grade

Students that value schooling outcomes
□ Low SES □ Mid SES ■ High SES

Grade

Students who are interested and motivated
□ Low SES □ Mid SES ■ High SES

Grade

6. Drivers of Student Engagement

Findings from Alberta's *OurSCHOOL Project: Measuring Student Engagement* 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. Four school-level factors were consistently related to student engagement: quality instruction (averaged across students and three key subjects), teacher-student relations, classroom learning climate, and teacher expectations for success. Figure 5 compares Mortlach School to national norms for each factor on a ten-point scale.

Figure 5: School-levels factors associated with student engagement at Mortlach School

■ School mean   □ Canadian norm

Quality instruction | Teacher student relations | Learning climate | Expect-ations for success
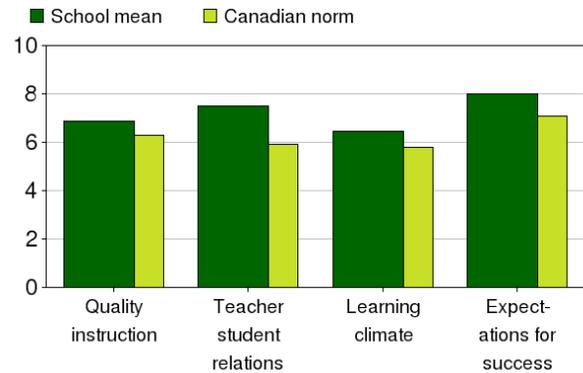
7. What Schools Can Do

Rather than seeing student engagement as an immutable *trait* of students, it is better to think of it as a fluid *state of being*, which can change as students proceed through school.[6] The onus to succeed at school rests with the student, but peers, families, and school staff can play an important role in shaping student engagement. Research conducted by The Learning Bar provides compelling evidence that schools vary substantially in their levels of engagement, even when students' backgrounds are taken into account. Moreover, school staff can take concrete steps towards increasing student engagement.

First and foremost, all students need an advocate - someone at school who consistently provides encouragement and to whom students can turn to for advice. School staff need to know who the acutely disengaged students are 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 the school counsellor or district psychologist; it needs to be viewed as a key role of classroom teachers.

A substantial number of disengaged students have poor literacy skills. Most of these students did not learn to read well during elementary school and therefore have a long history of feeling inadequate as learners at school. They need an intervention aimed at improving their basic reading and math skills. Some disengaged students are disruptive and disrespectful, and prone to participating in risky behaviours, including smoking, excessive drinking, drug use, and unsafe sexual practices. They need short- and long-term plans for school success guided by school staff. Many of them need help in developing positive friendships and resolving conflicts in constructive ways. Some require professional help to overcome addictions.

A number of students who are disengaged suffer anxiety and depression. The school can play a role in reducing anxiety and depression 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 24 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. **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.

3. **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.

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

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6. **Sinclair, M. F., Christenson, S. L., Lehr, C. A., & Reschly-Anderson A.** (2003). Facilitating student engagement: Lessons learned from Check & Connect longitudinal studies. *The California School Psychologist, 8,* 29-41.