

About Engagement



A **focus paper** presented by the
Nova Scotia School Boards Association
June 2014

Key messages about engagement

- ▶ People learn deeply (in a lasting way) through active participation in experiences that shape how they think, how they feel, and what they can do.
- ▶ The majority of Canadian students, including those in Nova Scotia, report feeling *socially engaged* at school through friendships and extracurricular activities. They are *institutionally engaged* in the sense that they are committed to getting the marks they need to graduate. But too few are *intellectually engaged* in deep learning.
- ▶ Students who are intellectually engaged are much more likely to understand the core concepts of the curriculum, to collaborate effectively, and to want to learn more.
- ▶ Intellectual engagement is fostered when the work that students do in school relates to their lives now and in the future and deals with issues or questions that concern them.



Founded in 1954, Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA) is the provincial voice for school boards across the province. NSSBA engages with its members and partners to raise awareness of public education in our province while helping students achieve their potential. All of the services offered by NSSBA are designed to enhance the effectiveness of its eight member school boards.

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About this paper

Student engagement has been on educators' minds for many years now. We know engagement matters. Engagement is about what students do in school and how they feel about it. Ideas about how to engage students have changed over time:

- from this* ► Give students a voice by asking for their opinions.
- to this* ► Design learning activities where students collaborate with each other.
- to this* ► Establish real partnerships where students and teachers design and learn together.

Too often, students are asked for their opinions, but the opinions don't count. Students are seldom involved in making policy decisions that affect their experience in school.

This paper sets out what we know about patterns of student engagement in Canada; how to engage students in deeper learning; and what benefits we can expect for our students if they become more deeply engaged in learning both in and out of school.¹

About Engagement is one of four papers in a series published by the Nova Scotia School Boards Association (NSSBA) to inform the Minister's Panel on Education and to engage all Nova Scotians in reimagining public education. The cornerstone of this series is the discussion paper, *Shaping a New Vision for Public Education in Nova Scotia* (April 2014). The series was drafted for NSSBA by Penny Milton, former CEO of the Canadian Education Association. All four papers are available online at nssba.ca/research-resources.

¹ Jodene Dunleavy and Max Cooke, "Illuminating the Blind Spots: Climbing from Student Voice to Student Engagement," *Education Canada*, vol. 50, issue 5 (Canadian Education Association, 2010), cea-ace.ca/education-canada/issue/theme2010.

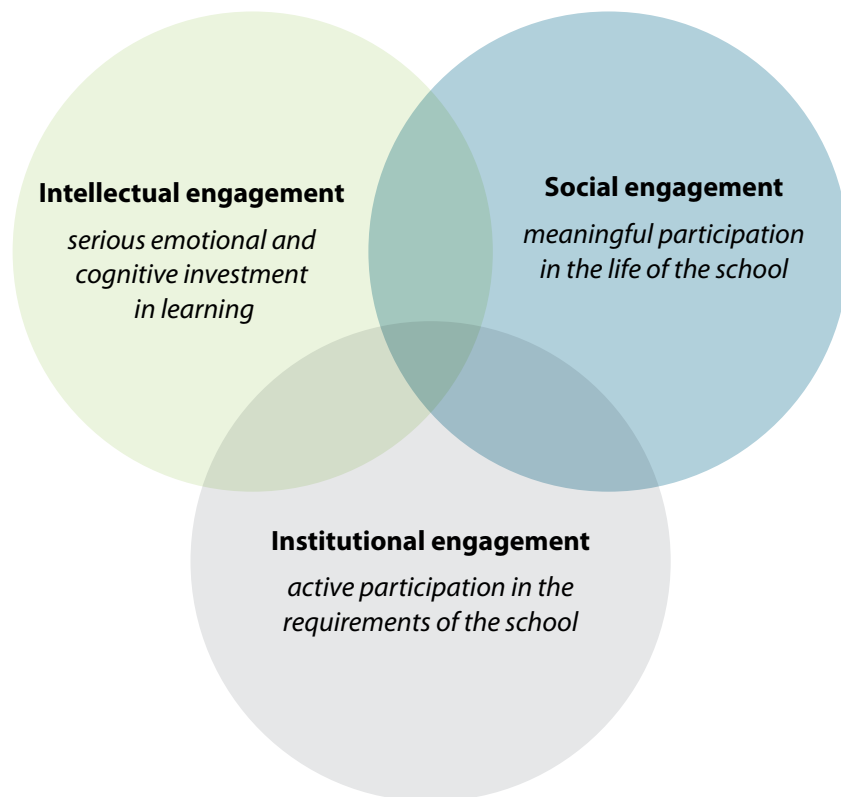
What is engagement?

Engagement usually means a commitment to something. Student engagement usually means that students are attentive, inquisitive, and curious.² Educators generally think that learning will be better if the student is engaged. Engagement is often misunderstood to be dependent on personal qualities of the student, such as motivation.

The Canadian Education Association (CEA) developed a more nuanced definition of student engagement involving three dimensions: social engagement, institutional engagement (originally referred to as academic engagement), and intellectual engagement.³ (See Figure 1.) All three forms of engagement help students to succeed in school and in life.

Figure 1

Three dimensions of student engagement



Social engagement is defined as “meaningful participation in the life of the school.” It is often experienced through participation in extracurricular activities, such as school teams, clubs, student government, and school-wide activities. Social engagement supports friendships, provides leadership opportunities, and builds social networks. It contributes to students’ sense of belonging and to self-confidence. Extracurricular activities are often said to be what keep some students in school.

2 Definition of student engagement at edglossary.org/student-engagement.

3 Jodene Dunleavy and Penny Milton, *What did you do in school today? Exploring the Concept of Student Engagement and its Implications for Teaching and Learning in Canada* (Canadian Education Association, 2009), cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/cea-2009-wdydist-concept.pdf.

Institutional engagement is defined as “active participation in the requirements for school success.” These requirements include attending classes; doing the assigned work; passing tests; getting marks; and aiming for graduation. The benefits of institutional engagement include high school graduation, acceptance to post-secondary programs, and a tendency to do good work and take personal responsibility. Sometimes institutional engagement has been pejoratively defined as “doing school.”⁴

Intellectual engagement is defined as a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning. It occurs when students work on real problems that deeply interest them. It involves individual and collective knowledge building, positive relationships with peers and teachers, and high expectations for success. Students who are intellectually engaged are most likely to be problem-solvers and conceptual thinkers who like to do original work.

These dimensions of engagement can work together. Students engaged in the extracurricular debating team are likely to be both socially and intellectually engaged. Students on sports teams engage socially, require the self-discipline associated with institutional engagement, and may use the analysis and problem solving associated with intellectual engagement. The classrooms envisioned by advocates for 21st century learning will be characterized by collaboration, high performance, and deep curiosity—in other words, social, institutional, and intellectual engagement.

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4 Denise Pope, “Beyond ‘Doing School’: From ‘Stressed Out’ to ‘Engaged in Learning,’” *Education Canada*, vol. 50, no.1. (Canadian Education Association, 2010), cea-ace.ca/sites/default/files/EdCan-2010-v50-n1-Pope.pdf.

Are Canadian students engaged in learning?

CEA conducted a groundbreaking study on student engagement, called *What did you do in school today?* The study measured the three dimensions of student engagement using the Tell Them From Me® survey designed by The Learning Bar.⁵ Over three years (2007–2009), the initiative grew from 32,000 students in grades 6–12 in 10 school districts across Canada, to over 60,000 students in 18 school districts, including 10 middle and high schools in the Halifax Regional School Board. The first-year results (2007) produced some surprises. Among students in grades 6–10 across Canada:⁶

- 69 per cent reported that they were socially engaged
- 69 per cent were academically (or institutionally) engaged
- only 37 per cent were intellectually engaged

Students were much more likely to be engaged in clubs and sports and to attend school regularly and do their homework than they were to be deeply involved in learning. All three levels of engagement declined between grades 6 and 9. While institutional (academic) and social engagement continued to decline in high school, the decline in intellectual engagement leveled off in the students' final years in school.

Intellectual engagement requires thinking and doing. Thinking and doing are the basis of learning, and so students' relatively low levels of intellectual engagement at school surprised many educators.

These are some of the strategies that different schools used to increase intellectual engagement:

Teachers

- engaged students in examining data and co-creating new ways to learn and participate
- learned about and practiced new pedagogies (teaching methods)
- used different ways to assess learning, such as working with students to co-design performance standards (rubrics), and providing peer and teacher feedback to help students see what good work looks like and how to make it better
- collaborated with colleagues to design and implement learning projects, often using team teaching

5 Learn more at thelearningbar.com.

6 J. Douglas Willms, Sharon Friesen, and Penny Milton, *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*, First National Report (Canadian Education Association, 2009), cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/cea-2009-wdydist.pdf.

Students

- adopted more inclusive student leadership and student government
- provided advice on school policies that affect students, such as dress codes and the use of cell phones at school
- conducted interviews or focus groups among their peers to more deeply understand patterns of engagement in their schools
- developed questions for deeper study and made choices about topics of study

After three years of data collection:

- 17 schools saw levels of intellectual engagement fall by 1 to 4 percentage points
- 39 schools saw levels of intellectual engagement rise by 1 to 5 percentage points
- 27 schools saw levels of intellectual engagement rise by more than 5 percentage points, with increases as high as 12 percentage points⁷

After three years of data collection from schools, further analysis produced interesting findings about self-reported student achievement. Student marks in mathematics, language arts, and science were strongly related to institutional engagement. The measure of engagement with the weakest relationship to higher marks was student interest and motivation. This indicated that students are doing well in school without being intellectually engaged.⁸

The study also found that quality of instruction (instructional clarity, relevance, and rigour) had a weak relationship to higher marks. Students can earn marks without learning in a way that is enduring or useful. Denise Pope of Stanford University calls the capacity to achieve high marks while not apparently making much effort as *doing school*.⁹ Students do all that is expected of them. They follow instructions, attend classes, behave well, get their homework done on time, and prepare for tests. They can be very successful by current measures in the short term, but may not develop the capacity for independent thought or persistence in the face of difficulty.

The CEA paper¹⁰ raised questions like these:

- What do marks and classroom assessments really measure?
- Does the work that students are asked to do require them to be intellectually engaged?
- What are the learning outcomes we need to assess to know what students have learned and can do?
- How does student assessment affect student learning?

These are not new questions. Promising answers can be found in a number of important studies and reports. The evidence tells us that curriculum, teaching practices, and assessment practices—taken together—profoundly influence students' experiences of learning.

7 Jodene Dunleavy, Penny Milton, and J. Douglas Willms, *Trends in Intellectual Engagement: What did you do in school today?* Research Series Report Number Three (Canadian Education Association, 2012), cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/cea-2012-wdydist-report-3.pdf.

8 Jodene Dunleavy, J. Douglas Willms, Penny Milton, and Sharon Friesen, *The Relationship Between Student Engagement and Academic Outcomes: What did you do in school today?* Research Series Report Number One (Canadian Education Association, September 2012), cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/cea-2012-wdydist-report-1.pdf. (In particular, see pages 4 and 5, Figures 4 to 6.)

9 Denise Clark Pope, *Doing school: How we are creating a generation of stressed-out, materialistic and miseducated students* (Yale University Press, 2001).

10 Dunleavy, Milton, and Willms, *Trends in Intellectual Engagement* (2012).

What do students need?

In *Shaping a New Vision for Public Education in Nova Scotia* (April 2014), NSSBA noted: “Test scores can be useful, but they are only part of a bigger picture. They cannot tell us how well we are doing at preparing students for life beyond school.” Efforts to improve public education by improving students’ marks fall far short of the goal to ensure that students graduate with useful skills and knowledge, and with the curiosity, resilience, and motivation to face complex problems and thrive in a complex world.

Students themselves know what they want; and in many ways, what they want is what they need. Students want to be taught and allowed to make mistakes; to be respected, not judged; to be known for who they are without assumptions about their intentions. They can be overwhelmed by all that they are required to do. They need examples to show them what good work looks like and how to do it, step by step. Now more than ever, they need reliable relationships that emphasize teamwork and collaboration.

Students know and appreciate that their teachers can make a huge difference in their learning and their lives.¹¹ Changing the role of teacher from authority figure to learning partner challenges both students and teachers to engage in deeper learning.

The qualities, skills, and knowledge that NSSBA identified in its discussion paper (*Shaping a New Vision for Public Education in Nova Scotia*, Figure 3, page 14) call for more engaging work by students—work that is worth their time and attention, and that requires inquiry and reflection. Students do not simply need more activities, or more fun stuff; they need the opportunity to explore significant questions, develop ideas, and improve those ideas through the work they do with each other, with their teachers, and with community members and subject experts.

Engaged students bring benefits to themselves and their schools. Schools commonly report reduced truancy and fewer disciplinary problems when they focus on social, institutional, and intellectual engagement.¹²

11 Kathy Gould-Lundy, “Imagine a School,” *Education Canada*, vol. 46, no. 4 (Canadian Education Association, 2006), cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/EdCan-2006-v46-n4-Lundy.pdf.

12 For example, Paul W. Bennett, *Reclaiming At-risk Children and Youth: A Review of Nova Scotia’s SchoolsPlus (ISD) Initiative* (Atlantic Institute for Market Studies, June 2013), aims.ca/site/media/aims/SchoolsPlus%20June%202013.pdf

Call to action

If we want more students to learn more deeply, to become expert learners and problem solvers throughout their lives, we need to involve them in work that stretches their minds—work that keeps them interested because it is meaningful and because it helps them make sense of their world. The days are over when a student could say, “I don’t need to understand. I only need to pass the test.” It’s time to shift the focus from *doing school* to *deep learning*.

For more on deep learning and how to achieve it, go to the NSSBA focus paper, *About Learning*, available at nssba.ca/research-resources.

Appendices

Appendix A Acknowledgement

The Nova Scotia School Boards Association sincerely thanks Penny Milton for working with our association to write the papers in this series. Ms. Milton has written and presented widely on many aspects of social policy. She is a former, long-serving Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Education Association (CEA) and former Deputy Minister of the Ontario Premier's Council on Health, Wellbeing and Social Justice. She has supported public education as a teacher, parent, elected school board member, and staff officer with teacher and school board associations. In 2013, she and Debra Pepler conducted the External Review of the Halifax Regional School Board's Support to Rehtaeh Parsons.

Ms. Milton holds a BSc (Hons) from the University of Nottingham, a Certificate in Technical Teaching from Letchworth College, UK, and a Masters in Management from McGill University.

Appendix B Recommended resources

Videos

Imagine a school...

A dramatic anthology of students' stories of learning. Director: Kathy Gould Lundy. DVD. (Canadian Education Association, 2006).

See the trailer at [youtube.com/watch?v=WxPUr3iij1o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WxPUr3iij1o)

Snakes are born this way

A presentation of student learning (1:43 minutes). (Expeditionary Learning, 2012).

vimeo.com/51762436

High school science field study

A discipline-based inquiry (10:58 minutes). (Galileo Educational Network).

galileo.org/classroom-examples/classroom-examples-high-school-science/ecological-field-study

Article

Jodene Dunleavy and Max Cooke. "Illuminating the Blind Spots: Climbing from Student Voice to Student Engagement," *Education Canada*, vol. 50, issue 5 (Canadian Education Association, 2010).

cea-ace.ca/education-canada/issue/theme2010

Research

J. Douglas Willms, Sharon Friesen, and Penny Milton. *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*, First National Report (Canadian Education Association, 2009).

cea-ace.ca/sites/cea-ace.ca/files/cea-2009-wdydist.pdf

J. Douglas Willms and Sharon Friesen. *2012 WDYDIST Research Series Report Two: The Relationship Between Instructional Challenge and Student Engagement* (Canadian Education Association, 2012).

cea-ace.ca/publication/2012-wdydist-research-series-report-two-relationship-between-instructional-challenge-and

Organizations

Sound Out

An expert assistance program focused on promoting student voice and meaningful student involvement throughout education. (CommonAction Consulting).

soundout.org

Leaders of Today (LOT)

An emerging youth network in Nova Scotia that brings together diverse youth (ages 14–24), youth-serving organizations, and government to have meaningful dialogue, build relationships, and provide input into government programs and services.

leadersoftoday.ca

Books

Ron Berger. *An Ethic of Excellence: Building a Culture of Craftsmanship with Students*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

Ron Berger, Leah Rugen, and Libby Woodfin. *Leaders of Their Own Learning: Transforming Schools Through Student-Engaged Assessment*. (Jossey-Bass, 2014).

Eleanor Duckworth. *The Having of Wonderful Ideas, and Other Essays on Teaching and Learning*, 3rd ed. (Teachers College Press, 2006).