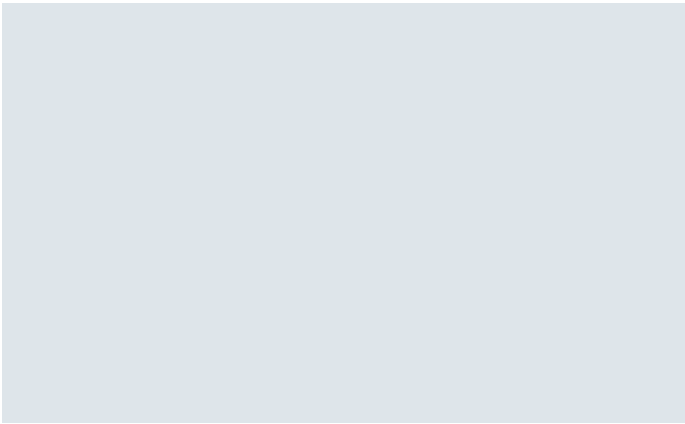




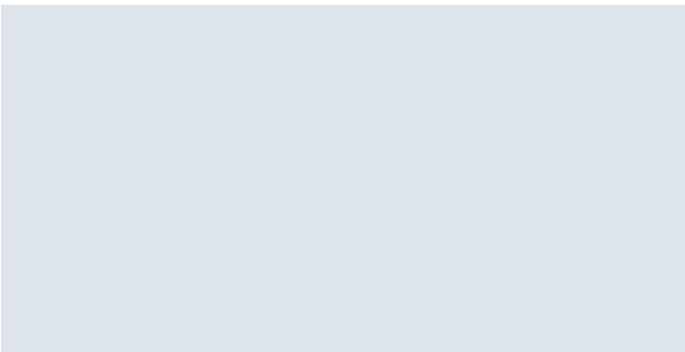
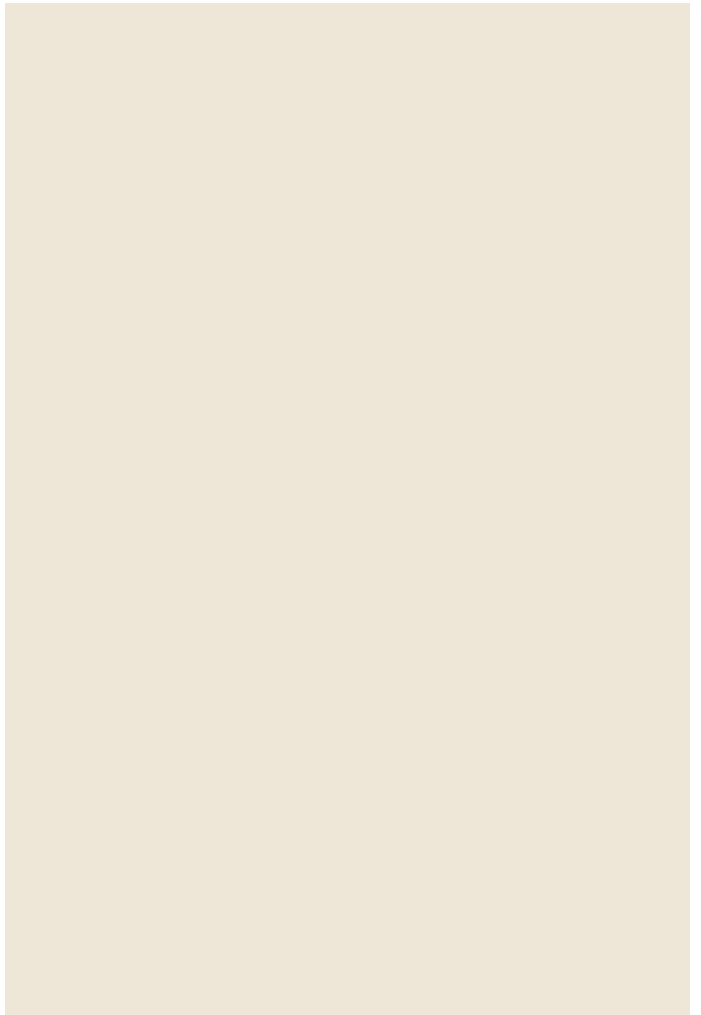
**Your work on student engagement has spanned a decade. What drew you to this work initially?**

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.



So this is the sense in which you suggest that we



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.

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.

### **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.**

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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.

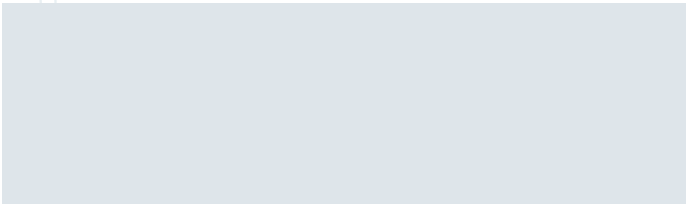
We can measure social, institutional and intellectual engagement, but we have to establish some criteria that distinguish engaged from disengaged students. In other words, at what point do you say "this score on our measure represents an engaged student and this score represents a disengaged student." 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."

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.

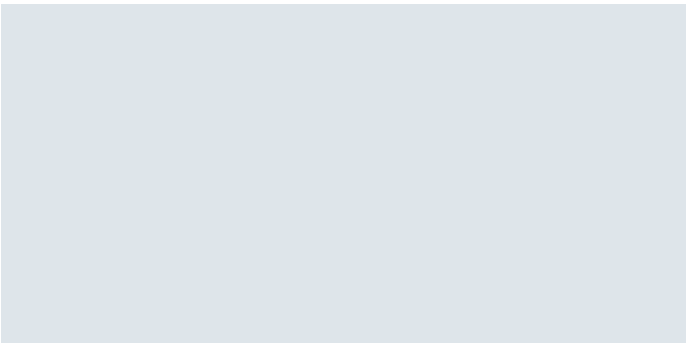
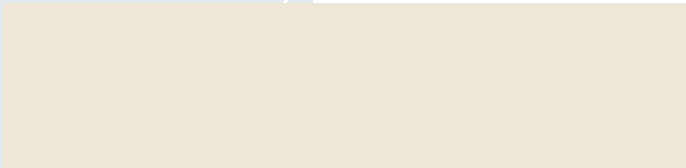
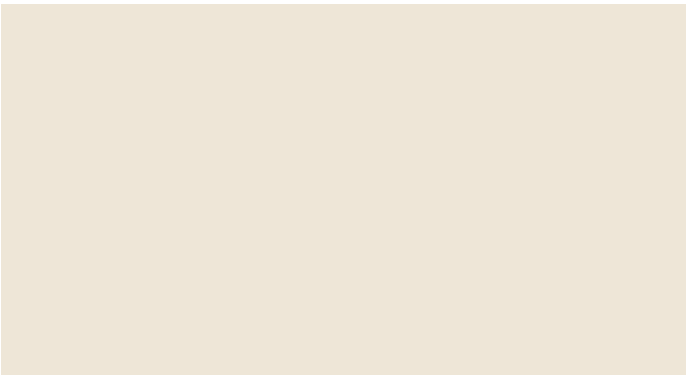
And that's what we've been doing – we're giving feedback to schools on their levels of engagement, compared to a standard that is set nationally.

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 *The First 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



Dr. Elizabeth Costa recently completed a study in Prince Edward Island in which student advisory





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?**

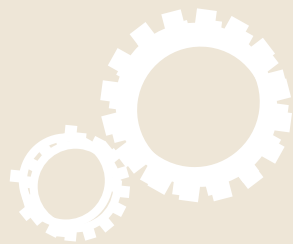
Well, parents are the "sine qua non." And it starts early, with reading to the child for example, that's essential. We have used our *National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth* to explore this. When we look at the various ways parents engage with their child – playing board games, going to the 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.

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



**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

