

M.A.S.S. Fall 2008 **Journal**

The official magazine of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents

THE ENGAGED Learner Students, Educators, and Community



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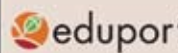
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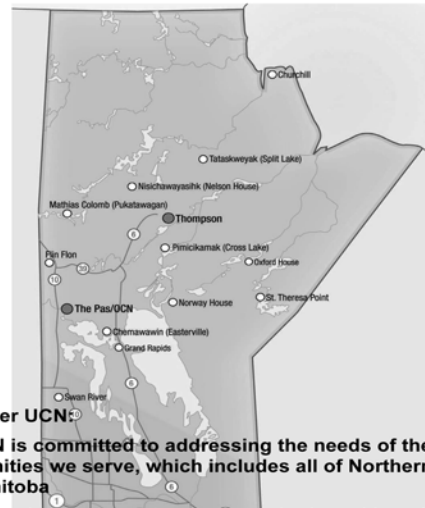
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Phone: (204) 487-7972

Fax: (204) 487-7974

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52 Donald Street

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President & CEO

Jack Andress

Senior Publisher

Maurice LaBorde

Publisher & Director of Sales

Joe Strazzullo

jstrazzullo@matrixgroupinc.net

Editor-In-Chief

Shannon Lutter

shannonl@matrixgroupinc.net

**Finance/Accounting &
Administration**

Shoshana Weinberg, Pat Andress,

Nathan Redekop

accounting@matrixgroupinc.net

**Director of Marketing &
Distribution**

Shoshana Weinberg

Sales Manager

Neil Gottfred

Sales Team Leader

Ken Percival

**Matrix Group Inc. Account
Executives**

Albert Brydges, Davin Commandeur,

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Bruce Lea, Kevin Harris, Brian Davey

Layout & Design

Cody Chomiak

Advertising Design

James Robinson

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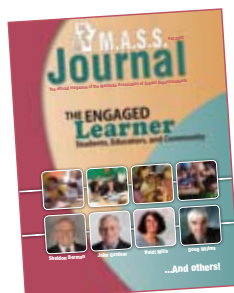
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On the Cover:

This issue of the M.A.S.S. Journal features four authors who will address The Engaged Learner Conference, October 23-24, 2008 in Winnipeg, as well as other Manitoba authors. All are asking the essential question, how can we engage our students, teachers and communities to ensure the youth of today are receiving the best education possible?



Peter Bjornson

Minister
Manitoba Education,
Citizenship and Youth

Ministre de l'Éducation,
de la Citoyenneté et de la
Jeunesse du Manitoba

Greetings

As we look forward to the new school year, I would like to take this opportunity to extend my appreciation to the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents on the strong partnership Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth enjoys with its members.

The Government of Manitoba is committed to continuously improve and strengthen all aspects of the public education system. Our goal is to ensure that every student in Manitoba is given the opportunity to achieve educational excellence. Achieving that excellence is made possible through partnerships with all education stakeholders. By working together, we can create an environment for every child to succeed, shine and grow. By working together we continue to build on a public education system that I believe is one of the best in the world.

Thank you for the work that you do and best wishes for the 2008/09 school year.

Message du ministre

Alors que nous envisageons avec enthousiasme la nouvelle année scolaire, j'aimerais profiter de cette occasion pour exprimer ma reconnaissance aux membres de la Manitoba Association of School Superintendents pour leur partenariat solide avec le ministère de l'Éducation, de la Citoyenneté et de la Jeunesse.

Le gouvernement du Manitoba s'engage à améliorer et à renforcer continuellement tous les aspects du système d'éducation public. Nous avons comme objectif de faire en sorte que chaque élève du Manitoba ait la chance d'atteindre l'excellence en éducation. L'atteinte de cette excellence est rendue possible grâce à des partenariats avec tous les intervenants en éducation. En travaillant ensemble, nous pouvons créer un environnement propice à la réussite et à l'épanouissement de chaque enfant. En travaillant ensemble, nous continuerons à bâtir un système d'éducation public qui, selon moi, est l'un des meilleurs au monde.

Je vous remercie pour le travail que vous faites et je vous souhaite mes meilleurs vœux pour l'année scolaire 2008-2009.



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A Message from the President



Kelly Barkman

*President of the Manitoba
Association of School Superintendents*

The publication of this issue coincides with the conference *The Engaged Learner*, which M.A.S.S. is pleased to sponsor

with Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth. We are particularly excited by the quality of speakers secured to address the importance of *engagement* as we seek in this new year to ensure a quality education for all students in our schools. Several of those speakers are featured in this issue, joined by writers from three school divisions and MECY.

They will draw parallels between growing problems in our schools and in our society and the lack of engagement by students in their own education. They will say that in order to increase engagement, we need to look at our assessment practices, our plans for students with special needs, and ensure that we are offering a wide enough variety of opportunities to stimulate engagement of all students—in academics, arts and sports. And we need to *listen* to our students.

If we are to educate the whole child, we must begin to place more emphasis and focus on the importance of student “buy in,” or engagement, in their own educational experiences. Students gain a feeling of ownership over their education and with that ownership comes a greater sense of pride in their accomplishments.

I am certain that together, as educators, we can continue to learn from our experiences and these and other experts in the area of student engagement. All that we learn we can put to use to further engage the students in our care and together work towards a happier, healthier society.

Kelly Barkman

President of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents



M.A.S.S. Executive 2008

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Are We Asking? Are We Listening?



By John Gardner

On these pages, and I am sure in many other leadership journals around the world, the challenge to improve the outcomes of public schooling is writ large. Looked at from a government perspective, for example, there is a need to account for the wise and efficient use of the tax dollar in schools. Another government viewpoint sees the future prosperity of the nation determined by the skills of its young citizens and their readiness for the workplace. And from yet another perspective, all of us as a society want to see our children flourish and be happy, successful citizens. So far so good, and all of these are laudable aspirations. But am I missing something? I am, you know.

Where is the student's perspective on effective schooling in all of this? Sure, there are surveys here and there that claim to give voice to the student perspective. But if we are honest about most of our education systems' endeavours, they are designed on the basis of what we (the "adults") think is best for the students. We expect them to come to know that we are right—eventually. But I wonder how right we are. Most schools do a good job at delivering the curriculum and following the various procedures set down for them in the modern variant of *in loco parentis*. However, there are plenty of schools that are little more than mediocre in ensuring their students have a good experience—and some that simply fail to provide a good education for their students at all. My guess is that,



ASAP students at Munroe Junior High (see page 26) enjoy a supportive school culture.

We need to seek out students' views in a purposeful partnership based on respect and trust if we really wish to improve what we do and make the most of the formative years of our youngest citizens.

whether in good or bad circumstances, the students themselves have little say in the matters affecting them in most schools.

As a society and as a community of educators we are quick to "know best" for children and young people, but does this not smack (no pun intended!) of an arrogance born of a top-down, directive approach? Surely what we have learned repeatedly is that when top-down policy and guidance are judiciously blended with the pursuit of teachers' participation and commitment, teachers can be encouraged to take ownership of the change and thereby increase the prospects of its successful adoption. Why then do we rarely, if ever, seek the opinion of the largest stakeholder group, the students, on such matters as school management, faculty appointments, the curriculum offered, the learning environment, the quality of teaching and so on? In their present mode of working, would most schools do well from a customer satisfaction survey among their students?

For me, an effective school can be identified from such features as its

students wanting to learn, enjoying their experience, fulfilling their potential and ultimately leaving as confirmed life-long learners. I can sense sage heads nodding ruefully: "Easy to say but..." The "buts" are legion: the need for good leadership, proper resourcing and high quality teaching to name just a few. Some would argue that even these are not enough. What we need, they would say, is a change of culture in our schools if we are truly to harness the natural desire of children and young people to learn about the world around them in all of its complexities. Now there is a challenge, changing the culture of schools and schooling.

Many of our schools run in an almost automated fashion, everything in its place, everyone knowing their place. Students comply and conform (and if they do not—well, that is another story) and teachers teach them the set curriculum and prepare them for the set tests. For the most part it is a one-size-fits-all system with a modicum of "best endeavours"—somewhere between seeing it as a virtue or a chore—in addressing the needs

of those who are different. All too often, in such circumstances, interest in a student view on their schooling is not a priority or at best it is voiced as ventriloquism—more or less what we (the “adults”) think they are thinking. But how do we really know if our school system is providing the education, personal development and learning that our students want, need and are entitled to?

We can begin by drawing on our improved understanding, developed over some 50 years, of how learning is facilitated, motivated and improved. The professional development community, both academic and professional, is beginning to learn and absorb the key ingredients of preparing quality teachers. For example, if we involve teachers in the planning and design of their professional development they will own it and commit to it, and the benefits will be reaped in the classroom. We can also look back and chart how the world of education has juggled the complexities of what knowledge is most worth and what combination of curriculum, assessment and pedagogy is best, though only a fool would argue that we are anywhere near the end of that task.

Theories too have helped us along. Constructivism plays the leading role, surrounded by its troupe of innovative supporting acts: thinking skills, assessment for learning and dialogic teaching, to name but a few. Popping in and out of the wings, behaviourism continues to play its sometimes benign but mostly menacing role, dressed up to woo audience approval in its various guises of public accountability and improved standards. All of these can help to explain how we have reached the point at which we are now, in the political and social drama that is education.

However, if we really want to identify the next steps in improving schooling and its outcomes, we must scan the horizon for clues. Looming close and exciting will be the next developments in the enhancement of education through technology and social learning. But there is something arguably

Recognition of the importance of enabling students to play a full part in the design, content and assessment of their schooling and learning will force a much more radical evaluation of teacher and school leader beliefs than we have so far seen.

more important, emerging in the far distance. If we strain our eyes we just might see the coming of real partnerships in schooling, between teachers and students. Some schools in the UK and Ireland have them already, but in my view they form a tiny minority. However, mature democratically-oriented relationships between teachers and students are actually the norm in some places around the world; the very culture of education in such places is in fact built on them.

Some years back I had the opportunity to meet with teachers and students in Denmark and was struck immediately by the sense of democracy in the relationship. Back at home, the power relationship is very much to the fore with resistance almost guaranteed to anything that might be perceived to undermine the authoritative role of the teacher. Indeed, there are those who might say that giving students a say, respectfully and meaningfully, in the business of the school, and specifically in their own learning, is a case of the “inmates taking over the asylum”; that only anarchy can prevail. Not so, not by a long way. There are others who would say that they can achieve the same as these Danish teachers and students through school councils, but the story on them has not been universally good. Ranging from dealing with relatively minor aspects of school process to simply not being listened to, the extent of any real influence for students is generally limited.

Since my visit, I have also had the opportunity to supervise a doctoral student who was examining students’ perspectives on schooling. I suggested a trip to Denmark and off she went—with a deceptively simple brief: Why

do Danish schools appear to be more democratic and successful than elsewhere? What she found was that it was not simply a case of school culture. It was more the education culture itself. She came back with one name. Or four names to be precise: Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872).

If you google Grundtvig, among the many hits you will find his name given to a major European Union (EU) adult education program, and the link to adult education is no accident. Grundtvig rejected the early 19th century orthodoxies of schooling, where children were treated as empty vessels to be filled by the knowledge provided by teachers. Schooling at that time was rudimentary, of course, but his criticism of the conventional model was both withering and persistent over many years:

“...the School for Death...is what every school is, that begins with letters and ends with book knowledge, great or small, and that means everything that has been called ‘school’ over the centuries and everything that is still so named.

“For all letters are dead even if written by fingers of angels and nibs of stars, and all book knowledge is dead that is not unified with a corresponding life in the reader.

“... and not only are mathematics and grammar soul-destroying and deadening, but so is all exhausting brain-work for man in his childhood, before his brain and the rest of his body are properly developed and before life, both the inner and the outer, has become so familiar to us that we can recognize it in description

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and can feel a natural desire to be enlightened about its conditions. "Therefore, by seeking to implant in children the order, quietness, reflection and wisdom of old age, we graft only death from the weakness of old age on to both soul and body" (Jensen, 1984 p.66).

In essence he slammed the straightjacket of a fixed curriculum, the one-size-fits-all model of what students must do and what schools must do to them. Instead he wanted schools to enlighten students and instil a desire for learning that would prevail into and throughout adult life—hence the EU adult education programme of his name.

Grundtvig's philosophy cannot be the only influence that has made Scandinavian schools what they are today, but it has certainly been a major influence. And it has had over 150 years to contribute to developing the culture of student participation and school democracy. Recognition of the importance of enabling students to play a full part in the design, content and assessment of their schooling and learning, will force a much more radical evaluation of teacher and school leader beliefs than we have so far seen.

Clearly whims and fancies, whether students' or teachers', cannot form a responsible design for schooling but students' views on the weighty matters of curriculum, learning, assessment and pedagogy can be very insightful and thoughtful. On the other hand, tokenistic consultation may raise students' complaints about 'the physical conditions of school [which] are often the familiar face of a much deeper set of issues about respect—feeling that

Looming close and exciting will be the next developments in the enhancement of education through technology and social learning.

you matter to the school, that you belong, that it is 'your school' and that you have something to contribute' (Rudduck, 2006 p191). We need to seek out students' views in a purposeful partnership based on respect and trust, if we really wish to improve what we do and make the most of the formative years of our youngest citizens.

"Genteel ambition resents the thought that a school education

may not have been a giant stride forward to enlightenment but a step backward for life" (Jensen, 1984 p.68).

The final questions I would ask therefore are very simple. Are you asking? Are you listening? ■

Professor John Gardner is Vice-president of the British Educational Research Association, a member of the UK's Assessment Reform Group and a professor of Education at Queen's University, Belfast.

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Rudduck, J. (2006) The past, the papers and the project, Educational Review, 58 (2) 131-143.



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The Bridge to Civility:

Empathy, Ethics, Civics and Service



By Sheldon Berman

In 1979, social psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner wrote that “it is now possible for a person...to graduate from high school without ever having had to do a piece of work on which somebody else truly depended...or without ever having comforted or assisted another human being who really needed help.... No society can long sustain itself unless its members have learned the sensitivities, motivations, and skills involved in assisting and caring for other human beings” (p. 53). In the absence of a sense of community and family, many young people lose the connectedness that gives them these sensitivities, motivations, and skills. In part, the incivility and apathy of youth result from the break in their sense of connection to others, as well as from their lack of confidence that they can make a difference to others and to the world as a whole.

Democratic culture and social well-being depend on the renewing energy of young people who have the sensitivities and vision to help create a better world. Nurturing a democratic culture and a civil society was, in fact, the central mission of public education at its inception. Although we often pay lip service to this goal, we have not invested the energy, thoughtfulness, or financial support to ensure its effective implementation.

Children’s social consciousness

Research indicates that pro-social behaviour and activism are stimulated by the sense of connectedness to others, and by the sense of meaning that derives from contributing to something larger than oneself. Young people are continually negotiating a sense of meaning, place, and commitment. In subtle ways they ask, “do I have a meaningful place in the social and political world? Are there values I can make a commitment to and people I can stand with? Am I capable of contributing something useful to others and will they welcome and appreciate it? Will my efforts actually make a difference? Do I have the courage to act without guarantees of success?” A sense of self connected to one’s morality and to the world at large emerges over time and through ongoing dialogue with others. Family and important role models play a critical role in this development. Direct experience with human suffering or injustice helps crystallize it.

Throughout childhood and adolescence, young people are formulating

a theory of how society works and are negotiating their relationship with society. This relationship often remains implicit, visible only in offhand comments expressing their attitudes and judgments about the world around them.

Children, in essence, feel their way into the world. In spite of the stereotype of children as being egocentric, children care about the welfare of others and care about issues of fairness on both a personal and social level. Social consciousness and social responsibility are not behaviours we need to instil in young people, but rather behaviours we need to recognize emerging in them.

Therefore, restoring civility, nurturing character, or developing civic commitment in young people means reconnecting them with their community, providing them with the basic social skills to negotiate their differences with others, and teaching them they can make a difference. This does not occur as a result of a set of lessons on specific character traits or civic responsibility. It occurs when we take the issues of care,

For this Jefferson County (KY) high school student in a medical career program, service learning takes the form of assisting a dentist with screenings.



connection, and civic action seriously and make them core to the culture and curriculum of the school. It occurs when we apply what we know about learning in general to character and civic education—that we learn best by doing rather than by being told.

Over the past fifteen years, I have been fortunate to lead two districts that have pursued, in incremental steps, the teaching of civility, character, and social responsibility through instructional strategies focused on the themes of empathy, ethics, civics and service. The first district had 3,000 students drawn from a small working-class community; the other enrolls almost 100,000 students from a county that includes the 16th largest city in the United States. In both districts, we sought to embed these qualities into the fabric of each child's school experience from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Although the journey is an ongoing one, we have taken sufficient steps forward for our efforts to help others on the road to fostering social responsibility among young people.

Empathy

Often, adult reaction to incivility and challenging behaviour in children is to tighten the school's behaviour codes. Although this might be a small part of the solution, the problematic behaviour of young people is a communication to adults that they do not know how to act with compassion, empathy, and sensitivity in reaction to the needs of others or in response to conflict. The skill that is most critical to the development of social responsibility is that of taking the perspective of others, and the most productive instructional strategy to develop that skill is to teach young people skills in empathy and conflict resolution.

Social understanding and social responsibility are built on children's desire to understand and feel effective in the social world, to initiate and maintain connection with others, and to reach out to those in distress. Norma Haan and her colleagues, in studying the development of empathy and moral behaviour, found that children could think in profoundly empathic and

Resource organizations

Character Education Partnership: www.character.org

Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL): www.casel.org

Committee for Children: www.cfchildren.org

National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States: www.ecs.org

Developmental Studies Center: www.devstu.org

Educators for Social Responsibility: www.esrnational.org

Facing History and Ourselves Foundation: www.facinghistory.org

Northeast Foundation for Children: www.responsiveclassroom.org

moral terms. However, their behaviour did not reflect this because they lacked skill in handling moral conflict. Thus, the key to teaching empathy and moral behaviour is training and practice in those skills—perspective taking, conflict resolution, assertiveness—that enable us to maintain clarity in conflictive and stressful situations.

In Hudson, Massachusetts, we combined several programs to teach basic social skills and create a sense of community in the classroom. The preschools used the *Adventures in Peacemaking* curriculum produced by Educators for Social Responsibility. The elementary schools used an empathy development and anger management program produced by the Committee for Children entitled *Second Step*, supplemented with conflict resolution material from Educators for Social Responsibility. This program involves students in role plays and discussions that identify the feeling states of those involved and help students reflect on and practice various ways of appropriately responding to the situations.

To create a classroom environment that models these skills on a daily basis, the teachers in Hudson were trained in the *Responsive Classroom* program developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children. Based on the principles that the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum and that a specific set of social skills fosters children's academic and social success, the program enables teachers to effectively use class meetings, rules and their logical consequences, classroom organization, academic choice, and family communication to create a caring classroom environment.

In Jefferson County (Louisville),

Kentucky, we have blended the *Caring Schools Community* (CSC) program of the Developmental Studies Center with several other programs into a program we call "CARE for Kids." The program engages children in thoughtful class meetings that provide students with a voice in their classroom. Morning meetings drawn from the *Responsive Classroom* program further enhance students' social development. Teachers also use a model of developmental discipline that provides logical consequences for behaviour and gives children opportunities to reflect on and correct their behaviour. In addition, the program engages older students in service opportunities through mentoring younger students. Finally, the program includes activities that children take home to do with their parents, and school wide activities that engage parents in social and academic events at school.

Although Hudson and Jefferson County selected these programs to create the right blend of skill instruction and modeling for our circumstances, there are a number of equally effective programs. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) published a valuable review of these programs, entitled *Safe and Sound: An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs*. It is an excellent resource for schools interested in the social and emotional development of young people.

Ethics

Skills in empathy and conflict resolution are important, but not sufficient. Young people need to find a moral center within themselves and learn how

to manage moral conflicts. This does not mean preaching a particular set of values to children. In fact, there is little evidence to show that moralizing to children or giving them didactic instruction in moral principles has a positive impact. What seems to work best is a combination of considered dialogue about moral dilemmas, practice in situations of moral conflict, and role modeling by adults.

Consideration of ethics can become contentious for schools, with some individuals wishing to promote particular religious principles within the curriculum and others advocating for value neutrality. There is a middle path schools can follow that helps students reflect on the values we hold collectively as a society. The great contribution that the Character Education Partnership and the character education movement have made to this debate is to help adults see that we can agree on such collectively-held values as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, justice, fairness, caring, and citizenship. Affirming these values, while engaging students in dialogue about moral issues,

provides an opportunity for schools to nurture moral and pro-social behaviour.

Good curricula in the area of ethical development are difficult to find. Hudson and Jefferson County are using a program entitled *Making Meaning*, from the Developmental Studies Center, in which students read high-quality literature with pro-social themes and learn strategic comprehension skills through activities structured to teach social skills. To this, we have added historical fiction that shows people dealing with ethical dilemmas and making a difference through service or social activism, including books such as *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* by Mitchell and *Pink and Say* by Polacco.

In addition, we created a core ninth-grade social studies civics course whose essential question is: "What is an individual's responsibility in creating a just society?" A central part of this course is the *Facing History and Ourselves* curriculum. This curriculum engages students in the study of the roots of two twentieth-century genocides, the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide, and has extensions to genocides of the past two decades. The

curriculum confronts young people with the human potential for passivity, complicity, and destructiveness by asking how genocide can become state policy. It raises significant ethical questions and sensitizes them to injustice, inhumanity, suffering, and the abuse of power.

At the same time, it is academically challenging and helps complicate students' thinking so they do not accept simple answers to complex problems. In the process of studying both a historic period and the personal and social forces that produce genocide, students confront their own potential for passivity and complicity, their own prejudices and intolerances, and their own moral commitments. The curriculum develops students' perspective-taking and social-reasoning abilities, and students emerge with a greater sense of moral responsibility and a greater commitment to participate in making a difference.

Service learning and student leadership

Finally, to truly encourage civility and civic responsibility, young people need to

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be involved in taking action that makes a difference to others. They need to be a part of the solution, not passive observers. The understandings they develop through reflection need to be translated into action, whether it is through community-service opportunities or direct social or political participation.

We tend to treat young people as "citizens-in-preparation" rather than as active members of their community, and give them little responsibility for acting on citizenship skills. The studies of programs involving students in active engagement in the social and political arena indicate that this involvement may be an important stepping stone to later participation (Berman, 1997).

The Hudson Public Schools made a strong commitment to integrating service learning into the curriculum so all students had service experiences marked by continuity, depth and meaningfulness. From kindergarten to graduation, each grade develops its own initiatives. Kindergartners create a quilt and a book to donate to a homeless women's shelter. First graders have an ongoing relationship with senior citizens that helps teach students basic literacy skills. The second-grade classrooms collect food for the local Food Pantry. The third grade hosts a community services fair to publicize the efforts of community-based organizations. The fourth grade cares for wetlands and woodlands near their schools. The fifth graders work with classrooms of multiple-handicapped children to develop a respect

for diversity. A student leadership program provides middle and high school students with leadership training experiences such as student leadership conferences, summer institutes, and courses.

Service learning is more than tutoring younger schoolmates or raising money for a local food pantry. Although such activities are a part of the culture of service that must be present, true service learning means helping students make connections between the subject material they are studying and issues in the larger world. It means engaging students in action and reflection on important community, social, political, and environmental issues. It means thinking of students not as future

citizens, but as active and contributing members of their community today.

In the urban environment of Jefferson County, service learning takes on an additional dimension. The achievement gap in reading and math performance between White students and both African-American and Hispanic students is a real one, as is the achievement gap between those growing up in concentrated and generational poverty and those whose families have the means to better support their children's development. The wake left behind by racism and poverty is a long one, breeding an attitude of powerlessness and hopelessness. Underlying the achievement gap is an empowerment gap that

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must be confronted with the same intensity as we put into our reading and math remediation efforts. It is in this context that service learning provides the potential for real inroads toward empowerment and engagement. As Jefferson County launches its CARE for Kids initiative, we are poised to begin an equally significant initiative in service learning.

A commitment to community

Human beings gravitate to simple answers to complex questions. The path to teaching civility and character is strewn

with curricula that are no more than our own pleadings for young people to be good. If we are truly concerned with helping young people become good individuals and citizens, we need to look more deeply into what it is that promotes these qualities and then build sustaining programs. At a time when many members of the public, as well as most policy makers, are focused on standards, accountability and testing, Hudson and Jefferson County have made a bold commitment to teaching social and emotional skills. These districts have not neglected improvements

to their academic programs, but they believe students will benefit both intellectually and socially from an education that integrates challenging academics with a commitment to nurturing a caring and civil community.

Unless young people experience a sense of community and a connection to others and the earth, and see the implications of their actions for the future of our society and the planet, civility will mean little to them. The focus on empathy, ethics, civics and service is an effort to help young people experience the sense of community that ties us together. It is through this experience that young people begin to understand the meaning of the common good, appreciate that their actions have consequences for others and the community at large, and develop a sense of relatedness to and responsibility for the larger human community. Empathy, ethics, civics and service are planks in the bridge to community—and over this bridge lies a civility that enriches us all. ■

*Dr. Sheldon Berman is Superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, a Past-President of Educators for Social Responsibility, and a Past-President of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents. In 2003, he was selected as Massachusetts Superintendent of the Year. This is an updated and condensed version of an article that appeared in *The School Administrator*, Vol. 55, no. 5, May 1998.*

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Student Engagement and Mental Health:



By J. Douglas Willms

Recent Canadian Findings

"A common complaint from students is that they do countless surveys and no one ever listens to what they have to say.... The schools that appear to be most successful are those that use the results to identify and commit to short-term strategies aimed at improving school and classroom climate and increasing student engagement."

Most students are engaged in the life of their school: they get along well with their teachers and classmates; they are interested in what they are learning and consider it relevant to their future; they participate in a range of sports and extra-curricular activities; and they have a general sense of belonging at school. But some students do not feel that way. They do not feel accepted by others at school, and they do not find schoolwork interesting or relevant. During the elementary school years there are very few students that are disengaged, but at about age 12 or 13 many students begin to withdraw from school, and by the time they enter secondary school they are prone to dropping out.

Some of these students are disruptive in class, and drain the energy from teachers and their classmates. However, not all disaffected students are a "flight risk". Many students become passively disengaged—they *do school* in the sense that they attend classes and get good grades, but they are not genuinely engaged in learning or believe it is relevant to their future. Many of these students do not feel challenged in class, and so they develop strategies to wile away class time—talking with friends, doodling, day-dreaming, or doing homework for other classes.

Researchers typically define engagement in terms of the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, participate in academic and non-academic school activities, and have

a sense of belonging at school (Willms, 2003). This definition is embodied in Canada's largest national school survey, *Tell Them From Me*, which is being used in over 300 Canadian schools as part of a school evaluation program developed by The Learning Bar Inc. Recently the Canadian Education Association (CEA) launched a study called "What Did You Do in School Today?" which places greater emphasis on students' engagement in classroom learning. The study defines 'academic engagement' as "a serious psychological investment using higher order skills to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge". The CEA study is being conducted in collaboration with the The Learning Bar and Galileo Educational Network, an organisation which creates and disseminates innovative teaching and learning practices.

The research on student engagement has been preoccupied with its relationship to students' test scores in reading and mathematics, and the degree to which it predicts whether students leave school before graduation. However, many people view student engagement as an important schooling outcome in its own right: it is a disposition towards learning, working with others, and functioning in a social institution. When students feel accepted by their teachers and classmates, and experience deep engagement in learning in their classes, they develop a more positive attitude towards school and acquire



the habit of life-long learning. Student engagement is shaped by family values and experiences in the community, but it is also affected by school policy and classroom practice.

Student engagement can be measured reliably with student surveys. In a study of student engagement conducted as part of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), we found that we could accurately distinguish among students in their sense of belonging at school and truancy, and that schools varied in their scores on these measures even after taking account of students' socioeconomic background (Willms, 2003). *Tell Them From Me* includes very precise measures of students' sense of belonging and truancy, as well as measures of the extent to which students value schooling outcomes and participate in academic and non-academic activities at home and at school. The survey also assesses student health and wellness and several aspects of class and school climate. The CEA study, "What Did You Do in School Today?" extended *these* measures of engagement to include a measure of intellectual engagement, as well as measures of the extent to which students feel challenged at school and confident in their skills. In the first year of the CEA study, over 32,000 students in 87 schools participated, including over 14,000 students from five school districts in Manitoba.

As an example, the measure of "sense of belonging" assesses students' feelings of being accepted and valued by their peers and by others at their school. Students are asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement to statements such as: "At school I feel accepted for who I am" or "I get along well with others at school." Students respond to these statements on a five-point scale which is scored as follows: 0 (strongly disagree), 1 (somewhat agree), 2 (neither agree nor disagree), 3 (somewhat agree), and 4 (strongly agree). Students with an average score across the items that is above 2.4 (which is slightly higher than a "neutral" response) are considered to have a positive sense of belonging. Among the 85,387 middle and secondary students that participated in the 2007-08 survey, 72.3 percent had a positive sense of belonging. The prevalence varied considerably among schools,

ranging from 45 percent to 90 percent. This means that in some schools about 55 percent of the students had a low sense of belonging, while in others it was only about 10 percent.

On all of the measures of engagement there is a marked decline during the middle and secondary schools. For example, on the measure of intellectual engagement, which is based on ten questions about the extent to which students enjoy learning new concepts and ideas, find their class subject relevant to their everyday life, and are motivated in their classes, about 77 percent were considered to have strong intellectual engagement, leaving 23 percent disengaged. The prevalence of disengaged students was only 11 percent in grade 6, but this increased to 21 percent by grade 8, and continued to increase throughout the secondary school years to a high of 26 percent by grade 12. On this measure too, schools varied considerably. Among the 87 schools that participated in the first year of the CEA study, the prevalence of disengagement varied from 4 percent to 35 percent.

The measure of classroom intellectual engagement developed for the CEA study is significantly related to students' sense of belonging at school—the correlation is 0.25. Also, among students considered to have low levels of intellectual engagement, 47 percent are regularly truant, compared with 27 percent of those with average to above average levels of intellectual engagement.

Tell Them From Me also includes six measures of student health and wellness. Two of these measures are student anxiety and depression. Many children and adolescents experience feelings of intense anxiety, and worry incessantly about particular events or social situations. They can exhibit a range of physical symptoms including dizziness, nausea, heart palpitations, a dry mouth, sweating or feelings of panic. Other students experience depression, a mental state characterized by feelings of sadness, discouragement and inadequacy. These feelings tend to persist for long periods, from two or three weeks to several years. Youth experiencing depression are typically unable to find joy

and happiness in activities at school or at home, and some suffer to the extent that it affects their ability to concentrate, their appetite, and their sleeping patterns. For youth who have problems with anxiety or depression their feelings tend to be chronic and can become worse if there is no intervention.

About 11 percent of the students that participated in our survey in 2007-08 experienced high levels of anxiety, while 6 percent had high levels of depression. Anxiety tends to be a precursor to depression; among those with high levels of depression, 70 percent also had high levels of anxiety, while only 7 percent of those who were not experiencing depression experienced high levels of anxiety. Girls are about 1.5 to 2.0 times as likely as boys to experience anxiety or depression.

Students who have low levels of intellectual engagement at school are about 1.2 times as likely to experience anxiety as those with average to above-average levels of intellectual engagement. The relationship with sense of belonging is even stronger; those with low levels of sense of belonging are about 4.1 times as likely to experience anxiety and 6.6 times as likely to experience depression compared with those who have a strong sense of belonging at school.

Tell Them From Me also measures several aspects of classroom and school climate. The measures are consistent with Lezotte's (1991) correlates of school effectiveness, and with the features of a preventive, whole-school approach to supporting positive student behaviours as advocated by Sugai and Horner (2002). Their work, and recent research on vulnerable children in Canada (Willms, 2002), calls for schools to have effective policies and practices to support vulnerable youth, strong student advocacy, and positive relations with students, parents, and the wider community. Analyses of the data for over 85,000 students that participated in our surveys in 2007-08 found strong positive correlations of these measures with intellectual engagement, ranging from 0.73 to 0.79, and with students' sense of belonging at school, ranging from 0.57 to 0.65.

What schools can do

The availability of high quality, timely data does not by itself cause schools to change. School reform requires leadership that encourages the collaborative use of data to set the course for a school. Principals and

senior school administrators need to stress the importance of using data for decision-making, and support school staff in its use. The process of interpreting data and setting priorities is school-specific, and cannot be accomplished without dedicated time and

leadership. School staff need to be open to feedback, especially when it is critical, as this allows the dialogue necessary for school change to begin. Principals and teachers need to let students know they have been heard. A common complaint from students is that they do countless surveys and no one ever listens to what they have to say. Many schools effectively use student feedback in staff meetings, student council meetings, and meetings with parents, and they post key findings in school newsletters and bulletins. Student engagement surveys can also be used to help school staff establish benchmarks, see trends over time, monitor the impact of selected interventions, and assess the progress of sub-groups within the student population. The schools that appear to be most successful are those that use the results to identify and commit to short-term strategies aimed at improving school and classroom climate and increasing student engagement. ■

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Creating Cultures of Inquiry in Elementary Classrooms



By Heidi Mills



*The students, parents and staff of the Center for Inquiry, a genuine collaboration between the University of South Carolina and Richland School District II, are responsible for developing ourselves as more thoughtful, caring and intelligent people who delight in learning and are committed to creating a more compassionate, equitable, knowledgeable and democratic world! (1996).

Faculty from Richland School District Two and the University of South Carolina collaborated to create a school with a shared philosophy grounded in the principles of inquiry and democracy in an ethnically diverse community. We co-constructed this *mission statement and access it regularly to institutionalize the original vision and integrity of the school's philosophy with its values of care, compassion and equity. As the Curriculum and Development Specialist, I have been studying the evolution of inquiry within classrooms and across the school for the past twelve years (Mills and Donnelly, 2001; Mills, et al, 2001b). In this piece, I share key beliefs and practices that have contributed to the success of our inquiry-based curriculum and show what they look and sound like in practice using a classroom vignette (Mills, O'Keefe and Jennings, 2004).

What is inquiry?

As a stance, inquiry is the central thread woven into the fabric of the curriculum. It is not simply a set of

activities, strategies, particular teaching method, subject or time of day.

Inquiry is the driving force in all curricular structures such as reading, writing and math workshops as well as integrated units of study. Students inquire into well-crafted language and effective strategies for constructing and sharing meaning during reading and writing workshops. They inquire into the skills and strategies that mathematicians use when engaging in mathematical investigations during math workshop. And they inquire into ways to use reading, writing and mathematics as tools for learning during integrated units of study. Regardless of the time of day, grade level or curricular structure, we foster inquiry by helping children:

- Learn the importance of close, focused observations;
- Learn to value a sense of wonder and delight in learning;
- Learn through active engagement in the process;
- Learn the skillfulness of inquiry (how to learn);
- Learn to use the language of inquiry;

- Learn to pose as well as solve problems, skills, strategies, content and concepts through use;
- Learn to examine the world from multiple perspectives;
- Learn the importance of accessing primary and secondary sources;
- Learn how to use reflection and self-evaluation to grow and change; and
- Learn to appreciate the integrated nature of knowledge and life.

Bringing inquiry to life in the classroom

From the school's inception, we have been striving to create classroom cultures that foster inquiry in ways that look, sound and feel as engaging, joyful and intellectually rigorous as authentic learning in the world. Here we observe Tim O'Keefe's second grade classroom during exploration time and morning meeting.

Tim and his second graders were in the midst of a unit of study of cultures and animals seen through the lens of diversity. Having found a dead bat in his pool, Tim and his class buried the bat in order to excavate and examine

it five months later. Several children responded to Tim's invitation to examine and reconstruct the bat's remains one morning during exploration time. They recorded their findings and shared them during the morning meeting that immediately followed exploration time.

We join Tim and a group of children in the midst of their collaboration. They are sorting through the soil and carefully teasing out bones and then categorizing them in an effort to reconstruct the bat's skeleton:

Tim shared a hunch, "I have a feeling these are the stronger bones that go across the top [of the wing]."

Onastasia added, "These should be smaller joints."

Zach, who just joined the group asked, "Are you trying to put it together? That looks like an alligator model."

Lauren wondered, "Is this the claw?"

Tim responded, "It could be. I'd say if you have any questions about it put it down here and we can sort of sort it out."

They continued sorting and classifying and wondering together for a few minutes. Then Tucker decided it might be time to invite the class bat expert into the conversation. William had completed an impressive expert project on bats in first grade.

"I wonder if we should get William?" "William? Do you think this one is a female or a male?"

William responded honestly, "I have no idea."

Being resourceful, Tucker made another suggestion, "Hey! Why don't we try to find a bat book? There might be a bat book."

Tim was delighted and said, "If you look in the Zoo Books there might be a bat book and they show the skeleton I think. We should have done that first," validating Tucker's suggestion.

Although William learned a great deal about bats in first grade, he had a new question now, "Mr. O., is there a bone for the throat? Because the noise they make is produced from their throat."

Tim sought clarity, "What was your question?"

"The peep noise they make is made from their throat so I was wondering if there was a throat bone?"

"I'm sure there are some bones in the throat."

Lauren, who had been sorting and working parallel to the group, looked over and asked, "I wonder if it's a female or a male?"

Tim answered, "I personally don't know but I'm pretty sure that bat experts can tell... Oh look!" Tucker opened the Zoo Book to the page featuring a bat skeleton. "Perfect! Set this up here. I think you can tell the difference between a male and a female by the way the pelvis is shaped. Because a female's is more shaped for having babies and the male's is probably more narrow."

Tucker referred to the diagram noting, "There's another leg bone right about there, 'cause look," pointing to the Zoo Book.

Tim confirmed, "Oh, I think we had that right. You're right, there are two leg bones together on the bottom."

Onastasia added, "We need to put these together."

Tim made a connection, "So that's just like a human. There's one at the top, that's called the femur and there's two little ones down below."

The conversation continued until Tim played the clean-up music and they all gathered on the carpet in the front of the room for morning meeting.

Tucker read his entry in the science journal, "The bat's bones are skinny. There is hair."

Tim suggested, "Show them the diagram."

Tucker responded, "There's the bones and the skull," pointing to his entry.

Building on Tucker's entry, Tim added, "He wrote this when we first started digging. The more and more we dug, the more and more things we found. And Lauren was in charge of the big pile of dirt. She was so meticulous she kept finding smaller and smaller things. It's easy to find the big bones, the skull and hipbones and so forth but she just kept at it while some of us were gluing it together and she kept finding more and more things. Then Tucker said, 'I wonder if we have a book about this?' So he found The Zoo Book and opened it up and looked at a diagram of a skeleton and it confirmed some of the things we were thinking. Right, Onastasia?"

Onastasia reacted, "Yeah, you're right, that is the pelvis."

Tim continued, "We confirmed some of the things but had to rearrange some of the bones we had down because we weren't exactly sure where they went."

Onastasia chimed in again, "I tried to go on the internet to see if I could find out any more things about them. Cause we thought that the human body was much similar to the bat body."

Acknowledging her idea, Tim added, "Almost the exact same kinds of bones, we noticed. Like in the leg bone, there's one big bone here and two smaller bones down here [pointing to his own leg to demonstrate] just like on humans and the vertebrate and the backbone, very, very similar. Even to the point where they had fingers."

Pointing to a diagram in The Zoo Book, Tucker asked, "Is the collar bone somewhere?" They explored the relationship between the bodies of bats and humans for a moment and then Tim asked, "Any questions or comments for us?"

Cody began with a compliment, "Well I think that you guys did a great job because I would probably be doing something else but then I thought, 'maybe I should go help them too,' but then I noticed that you were already done. I noticed how fast you did it."

Tim said, "Thanks. Maybe we can do something like this again."

Zach added, "Well, uh, this is sort of like a time capsule because you buried it five months ago and you saw how it looked five months ahead."

Tim reacted, "Yeah, so it was a time capsule, you're right."

Jasmine pointed to the model in the book and asked, "The backbone looks like sticks and I don't know, do they eat flies or worms and other stuff?"

Tim responded, "They eat small insects, mosquitoes. Actually, I'm glad you asked that. We kept asking William to come over and give us his ideas because we kept having questions like someone said, does a cricket sound like a bat? William, do you want to tell them about that?"

"Well, um bats are... bats may sound the same but we don't really know because they are so high pitched we can't hear them. It's called ultrasonic sound."

Tim asked, "So, therefore, if you can't hear the bats and you can hear the crickets, they must have a different sound, right?"

William clarified, "They have a higher pitch and the frequency is too high for our ears to pick up."

So what?

This was a substantive conversation for second graders and demonstrates the key principles of inquiry. The children were learning the skillfulness of inquiry by learning to use primary

and secondary sources. As the children generated questions when working with the primary source materials, they accessed non-fiction literature, the internet and the class expert to attempt to answer them.

Both teacher and children extended one another's thinking by sharing observations, connections and questions using the language of inquiry. As young scientists, they were learning to value close, focused observations. They were learning strategies and science content through active engagement in the process. They

were also using reflection to teach others and to grow in their own understanding.

All voices were heard and valued. Because their teacher intentionally created a culture of inquiry, the children were developing as more thoughtful, caring and intelligent people who delight in learning and are committed to creating a more compassionate, equitable, knowledgeable and democratic world! ■

Heidi Mills is a professor at the University of South Carolina and the Curriculum and Development Specialist at the Center for Inquiry.



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Munroe's ASAP: Engagement for All Students Moves from Intention to Reality

By Bob Dixon, Gareth Neufeld and Tammy Mitchell



Munroe students in discussion with co-teachers during the weekly group meeting.

According to school reform experts Fullan, Hill, and Crevola, “education needs a system that will support the day-to-day transformation of instruction for all students—a system that is both practical and powerful” (2006 p. xv). This sounds like a tall order for any school, but École Munroe Jr. High School, a small grade 7-9 Winnipeg school in the River East Transcona School Division, has accomplished just that, specifically by developing and implementing ASAP—“All Students Achieving Potential.” Over the past three and a half years, this initiative has moved the school beyond intentions and made inclusion a reality.

Our school is located in north Elmwood, a part of Winnipeg that has been described as among the most socio-economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city (Brownell et al. 2004). The area’s demographics indicate a significant number of unemployed persons, a high number of homes with lone parent families, a disproportionate number of adults without high school education, and fewer women in the workforce than the city’s average. Brownell et al.’s study also gathered high school completion data in Winnipeg’s neighbourhoods, and found that our area has a 37 percent completion rate, as compared to 81 percent in high socio-economic neighbourhoods.

Munroe is a dual-track school, with both English and Late-entry French Immersion (LFI) programming. The

English track is populated predominantly by students from the immediate neighbourhood, while the LFI programme attracts students from the entire school division. Historically, Munroe’s English track has seen a high rate of behaviour-related office referrals and suspensions, and a considerable number of students failing to find academic success.

Our process

We at Munroe had come to realize that “business as usual” just wouldn’t do any longer, and so we focussed our discussions about change on the development of an instructional model that supports differentiated instruction and assessment using co-teaching partnerships. We started small, creating co-teaching partnerships in just a few classes. Three and a half years later, virtually all English track classroom teachers and educational interns in the core academic classes are co-teaching **all** students in regular classrooms.¹ Paraprofessionals are not being used and students are not being pulled out of their classrooms. Our resource team has guided the teachers in the use of curriculum compacting and clustering, outcome-based planning and assessment and differentiated classroom structures. We’ve seen a significant positive impact in the rate of learning for all students.

Significant shifts like these cannot be accomplished overnight. Every player in the school community has to be willing to change and ready to commit themselves to a major learning process. Over the course of the three years, we used every professional learning opportunity to i) focus on developing a set of shared beliefs and structural supports, and ii) acquire skills in outcome based instructional practice and assessment. Early in our journey, the entire staff collaborated on the development of a PATH (“Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope”) and have used it as a direction-setting foundation for our reform. We also participated in a two-year-long assessment residency during which we moved our assessment practices into line with the practices endorsed in the current literature on assessment of and for learning. These intensive and focussed professional learning opportunities moved

Footnote

1. In ASAP, co-teachers are Educational Interns or Teacher Partners. Educational Interns are university-based teacher candidates who typically complete all four years of their practicum in the ASAP program. Teacher Partners are certified teachers (often recently graduated ASAP Educational Interns), who participate in the Co-Teaching Outcome Based Differentiated Model, as described above.

Munroe's staff toward a common set of beliefs and structures. The staff now understands that there is an unequivocal link between learning and behaving, and that students learn best in de-segregated classrooms that offer purposeful support for the whole child. Munroe staff has found that the structures that best support student learning include diverse instructional strategies, flexible student grouping, powerful promotion of positive behaviour, and synergistic teaming.

The results

Data collected during the past three years back up what Munroe's staff has found. It indicates that the ASAP initiative is increasingly making inclusion a reality and is improving student learning. Standardized assessments for math, reading, and writing show that students move up an average of two to three grade levels in 10 months of instruction. Another area in which we've seen dramatic progress is in the area of behaviour. We have seen a drop in suspensions in 2007/2008 to less than 50 percent of the numbers recorded for 2005/2006. It's not that there isn't conflict at Munroe, but rather that a significant number of students are trusting that alternatives to physical violence can work for them. During the year 2007/2008, our guidance counsellor logged over 70 mediations, 80 percent of which were initiated by students rather than by staff, and were, therefore, proactive rather than reactive meetings.

Classroom structure

Fullan et. al. (2006) identify personalization, precision and professional learning as the core components required for the transformation of classroom instruction. In ASAP, we have incorporated these three elements, and provide support and intervention for learning and positive behaving on a number of important levels. We believe that the success students are finding through the ASAP model stems *primarily* from classroom programming. We now use individual students' achievement levels rather than their grade level as the starting point for instructional planning, and that important change has moved us away from large-group instruction. Instead, we've implemented an outcome-based, small-group instructional

model that meets the range of learning and behaving needs for all students.

Curriculum compacting and clustering

According to Fullan (2006), decreasing the gap between high and low performers is critical to decreasing social issues. To accomplish this crucial goal, ASAP adapts student-learning outcomes to match each student's learning readiness. Many of Manitoba's curricula are spiral in nature and provide a large number of outcomes at each grade level, though all outcomes become critical at some point during a student's learning. Compacting the outcomes into *critical, important, and desirable*, identifies the core learning at a particular grade level and provides Munroe teachers with a more focused number of outcomes to assess. Some outcomes are meant for exposure only. For ASAP use, these outcomes are categorized *desirable*. Outcomes that form the foundation for future learning, and are re-taught at the next level, are considered *important* within the ASAP framework. Outcomes that underpin essential learning or terminate in their presented form become the *critical* learning outcomes for our students.

Since all outcomes become critical at some point, assessing students' mastery of critical outcomes at each grade level ensures that core learning takes place. Clustering outcomes has greatly increased efficiency in our outcome-based planning and assessment process.

Outcome based planning and assessment

By thinking of school curricula as a continuum of skills that range from kindergarten to grade twelve, we have been able to develop programming that individually meets the needs of all students at Munroe. Teachers use this outcome continuum to assess their students against the outcomes of a particular subject, identify where on the continuum each student falls, and then regroup students based on their learning needs. We then methodically move students along the continuum from their point of entry forward. Measuring the student's progress against curriculum outcomes instead of products (e.g. assignments, projects) is the premise that underpins ASAP's assessment

strategy. The concept of outcome-based planning links to Fullan et al.'s (2006) first core reform principle of personalization or putting "each and every child at the center and providing an education that is tailored to the students' learning and motivational needs at any given moment" (p. 16).

Differentiated structure

Based on the initial outcome-based assessment, our teachers use a standard range of one and a half years to establish student-working groups. For example, a typical Grade 7 class will contain three groups, accommodating a learning range from Grades 3-7, with the possibility of a fourth group for students who have met all the Grade 7 outcomes, and are ready to move forward. This structure accommodates the learning needs of students in all four groups, who are working on four separate critical outcome-based programs in a single classroom at the same time. Importantly, the physical layout of the classroom has been adapted to allow the four separate student groups to function inter- and intra-dependently. Thus, ASAP's differentiated structure of outcome-based instruction and assessment is very similar to Fullan et. al.'s second principle of reform; "[p]recision is in the service of personalization because it means to be uniquely accurate, that is, precise to the learning needs of the individual" (p. 18). By using assessment-for-learning data to guide instruction, ASAP has ensured that student learning and engagement has been strengthened, and this, as we understand it, is *the* primary cause of our students' significant academic growth rate.

ASAP's response to student's social/emotional needs

The primary goal of the co-teaching classroom model is support for student learning; in both theory and practice, however, ASAP also significantly supports students both socially and emotionally. Very early in the development of ASAP at Munroe, we recognized the need for this support, and used our financial resources to respond. Our guidance counsellor now partners with a divisional social worker whose school-based time has been increased from a half-day/week to 2.5 days/week. The counsellor-social worker partnership equips students with

appropriate socio/emotional skills and replacement strategies so that while they're in the classroom, they can focus on their academic work rather than on the personal issues that so often seem to get in the way of learning for students in the middle years.

How ASAP is funded

From its inception in 2005, ASAP was designed to be developed within the River East Transcona School Division's existing funding structure. Funds to hire the educational interns, teaching partners and to cover the additional social work time have been provided by re-allocating provincial funding (allocated Student Services and level II and III grant dollars). Accountability structures (education plans and summative reports) have been put into place to ensure that the learning and behaving needs of students identified to receive these grant dollars are being met. Significant support provided by divisional departments contributes to

ASAP's success, a recent example being an electronic template designed to support schools in completing the application of categorical grant funding.

Implications

Fullan et.al.'s reform principles—personalization, precision and professional learning—are embedded in the ASAP structures of curriculum compacting and clustering, outcome-based planning and assessment, differentiated structure and co-teaching. The success of École Munroe Junior High School's ASAP program could be used as a model for other school leaders who want to respond positively to the challenges posed by Manitoba's legislated requirements for inclusion. Implementing ASAP at Munroe has been a steady process of changing beliefs and practices; three and a half years after it was begun, the process has clearly met our original and ultimate goal, which was and is to significantly improve student learning and to do so

by ensuring that all students achieve their potential. ■

Bob Dixon is a Resource Teacher and Gareth Neufeld is Principal, at Ecole Munroe Jr. High, River East School Division, and Tammy Mitchell is Manager of the division's Student Services.

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Student Engagement and Democratic Renewal: **A Marriage in Trouble**

By Alysha Sloane

Professional development days are intellectual treasure troves of possibility. Each time I walk into a conference room and spot a PowerPoint presentation, free hotel pens and large blank pieces of paper taped to the wall, I become delirious with anticipation. As someone who cares very deeply about how engaged or not students are in their learning, I have sought out a myriad of professional development opportunities to learn from people who have thought very carefully about this subject. Presenters offer a series of helpful techniques that, if combined together at a prescribed moment in the space time continuum, *minus any identifiable personal and professional flaws of course*, should result in wide spread student engagement.

Nevertheless, the exit slip portion of many of these PD experiences inevitably causes me to feel a mixture of intellectual confusion and panic. When I reflect back to all the PowerPoint slides and the question and answer periods, I find it difficult to recall many conversations about how these student engagement fragments are meaningfully connected to why we send children to public schools in the first place. Why do we really care if students are engaged learners? Has the connection between student engagement and democratic renewal completely vanished from public consciousness?

Young people should graduate from Manitoba schools able to voice opinions, with the passion to speak out against injustice and with the ability to activate others to pursue common goals. Students need to be able to

If some of the goals of public education are the realization of a flourishing democracy, environmental sustainability, peace, gender equality and the eradication of poverty, what if we actually made these topics the curriculum?

deconstruct power relations and solve problems that will help reduce and eliminate human and environmental suffering. These are the noblest and most important goals of public education in a democratic society.

There needs to be a conscious understanding amongst educators at all levels of the system of the larger purposes of student engagement because the health of our democracy depends on this marriage. For example, if cooperative learning strategies are discussed solely in terms of improving students' group work skills in class, the macro context of such a pursuit is ignored. The reason we want young people to be good group members in class is that we hope they become adults who are peaceful and interdependent community members. We certainly need more people in the world who know how to wage peace instead of war.

Student voice is a vehicle used frequently in the quest for student engagement. We offer students choice in how they present information, we ask them for perceptual data on the inner

workings of the school, sometimes we even let them voice their opinions on what research topics will occupy their time in History class. Yet, how often do we discuss with students and parents the connection between student voice activities and the education of a vibrant democratic citizenry?

Some might argue that the absence of the discussion causes no harm, but we cannot leave it to chance that young people will infer the connection between the development of student voice and democratic principles. The tenets of student engagement need to be situated within the context of the larger community so that students can use their voices purposefully throughout their lives. Expressions of individualism that sometimes wash into division office switchboards is an indicator that parent and student 'voice' is increasingly about an individual's social and economic mobility instead of community aspirations. Policy makers and educators are in a unique position to initiate public debate about what it is public education should endeavour to accomplish.

Many of the student engagement conversations that take place in schools are focused on *how* we should engage students. Very little time and attention is paid to *what* should engage Manitoba students and *why*. When teachers do sit together and discuss curriculum, the conversations are often isolated in the moments where they decide what to cover and what to leave out. Changes to curricular content are left to small, insular, subject specific provincial committees. Rarely are the schools', divisions' or provincial mission statements dusted off and used to scrutinize what students learn in relation to the kind of democratic society Manitobans are trying to actualize. If you think about your own mission statement, are the content areas in the Manitoba curricular documents the most important things for students to learn? Do Manitoba curricula allow the aims in your mission statement to reach beyond the perimeter of the school division?

In 2000, Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth published an excellent resource called, "Education for a Sustainable Future: A Resource Document for Curriculum Developers, Teachers and Administrators." The intent of the document is to encourage educators in Manitoba to "integrate sustainability concepts into new and existing curricula" (2000, p.3). The document describes how to teach young people about the knowledge, values, life practices and decision making skills that lead to sustainable living. There are interdisciplinary curricular connection maps and lists of topics for the integration of sustainability issues.

I believe excellent projects like this publication are born out of an attempt to circulate more social and environmental justice issues in schools. Unfortunately, initiatives like this one have in some ways fragmented students' engagement in subject matter like democratic decision making, peace building and environmental responsibility from the explicitly stated purposes of public education. Topics related to the elimination of human and environmental suffering are dangerously assimilated amongst a myriad of others in order to create allure for students inside the 'legitimate' curriculum.

If some of the goals of public education are the realization of a flourishing

democracy, environmental sustainability, peace, gender equality and the eradication of poverty, what if we actually made these topics *the* curriculum? Could *Education for a Sustainable Future* become a core discipline for students in Kindergarten through grade 12, and if so, what should it replace? Basic skills and the long lists of process outcomes in Manitoba framework documents could be addressed within these important content areas.

The days of institutionalizing the notion that content is irrelevant as long as students can hit prescribed skill targets should come to a swift end. For example, we should be very uncomfortable with an English Language Arts program that unabashedly lacks ethical or political content. When we pay such little attention to the content of *what* students learn in order to train independent, voracious consumers of new information, we strip young people of the opportunity to be critical of the status quo in relation to their personal and collective histories. In a time where the media describes the invasion of sovereign countries as 'peace building' and social activists as 'special interest groups,' schools must play a role in the engagement of future generations of wise community leaders who will seek to improve the human and environmental condition.

In my role as a classroom teacher, I am acutely aware that I must situate theory in practice in order to make sense of student engagement. The most exciting entry points that have assisted me in my enhancement of the relationship between student engagement and democratic principles are the tenets of Problem Based Learning (MECY, 2006)). In this approach to teaching and learning, students are presented with problems that actually exist in the community. The cases that students work on have no simple answers and their investigations culminate when they present and defend their conclusions to those impacted by the problem. In this context, students are engaged in a process where learning is multidisciplinary and inextricably linked to the betterment of society.

Problem Based Learning typically involves these steps:

1. Find or present a case study or problem;

2. Get curious and develop critical questions;
3. Define the problem;
4. Gather information and explore possibilities;
5. Invent options;
6. Evaluate options;
7. Create a plan;
8. Present what you have learned to people who are impacted by the problem; and
9. Work with other members of the community to make a dent in the problem.

Although the list above makes PBL appear to be a linear process, it is actually quite organic. For example, with new knowledge, a different problem statement may need to be developed. Sometimes a solution that looks good on paper is not workable in the community and teams need to go back and invent other options. Projects may vary in time and scope, therefore a classroom characterized by rigidity and conformity is not conducive to PBL.

Some of the critical questions that engaged my grade seven and eight students at Gordon Bell High School last year were:

*How can I get more people to understand the importance of buying Fair Trade products? Can I get other people to take the Fair Trade Challenge this month? (Cam)**

Is Al Gore really telling an Inconvenient Truth or is this just a normal climate change? How will I find out? (Pauline)

Why do some children have to live in poverty? Can people get out of it? Could I make a dent in the problem? (Antonio)

What happens to your brain if you get addicted to drugs? If it's real bad, how can you help people stop? (Dean)

The students in my classroom have found this process challenging and liberating. As they work through complex dilemmas alongside adults inside and outside of school who have different perspectives and skill sets, they grow a tremendous amount as human beings and learners.

Students come to understand that what they learn about in school, and the problems they help to solve matter a great

deal to other people. They become less obsessed with marks and learn to talk about education in the context of social change. I have seen young people who were once afraid to share an idea in front of the class, successfully facilitate meetings with representatives from community organizations and local businesses because they were totally invested in their projects.

To enhance student engagement adults must explicitly teach young people about the connection between classroom activities and a healthy democracy. Problem Based Learning

offers some exciting entry points for educators who seek to learn more about deepening this relationship. Administrators and teachers need to work beside students to identify important community problems and to take action to address issues of injustice however the boundaries of the community are defined.

A lack of self-efficacy needed to help address social problems, the inability to critique people in positions of power, and the continuous replication of the status quo, are just some of the negative and profound consequences

of disengagement. Students must consciously live democratic principles in *what* and *how* they learn if we want young people to claim their rights and responsibilities as engaged democratic citizens. ■

**Names of students have been changed.*

Alysha Sloane is a grade 7 and 8 teacher at Gordon Bell High School. Gordon Bell is located in the Inner City District of the Winnipeg School Division.



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Assessing Student Engagement in Manitoba

By Warren Nickerson

Manitoba's education community is buzzing with interest about student engagement. A conference for six hundred participants on the topic of engagement sold out soon after the co-sponsors, MASS and MECY, released information. Manitoba school divisions are redesigning assessment policies and classroom practices to encourage more student involvement in learning. A recent draft of a report card from a River East Transcona middle school gave equal space for both engagement and academics. Grant Park High School cancelled mid-year exams in grades seven and eight so that teachers could conference with students, allow them to reflect on their achievement, and set goals for the upcoming semester.

A part of this buzz is the new provincial middle years assessment that focuses on reading and writing at grade eight, and numeracy and student engagement at grade seven. Information from the assessment can provide system-level data to help educational leaders identify and set priorities and enable public reporting of relevant and understandable indicators of student performance (Levin, 2004, p. 3-4). What will the provincial assessment in grade seven tell us about student engagement?

The rationale for assessing student engagement

During province-wide consultations in 2004, Dr. Levin (former Deputy Minister of Education) discussed student engagement as a focus for assessment. Beyond academic competence, student engagement would look at "the degree to which students are actively involved in and take responsibility for their education" (Levin, 2004, p.5). Engagement was seen as crucial for student effort and success in school, and beyond school, as connected with lifelong learning. The conversation about student engagement, in conjunction with student self-assessment, would itself have beneficial consequences for students (p. 5).

Examining 2008 reports on student engagement by program

What would a conversation about engagement results sound like? To illustrate the process divisions could use to examine their own results, let's examine the provincial results from January, 2008.

A place to start is to describe the general trend. Divisions could examine the proportions of students in each category, and note differences between programs (English,

French Immersion, Français), between schools, or between the division and the province. School leadership teams can make observations and identify priorities.

Take for example the general trend in the English Program results for student engagement in Figure 1. Teachers reported that approximately three quarters of grade seven students are engaged either "quite often" or "nearly always" in each of the five competencies. The strength of this

Figure 1 - Grade 7 Student Engagement - English Program

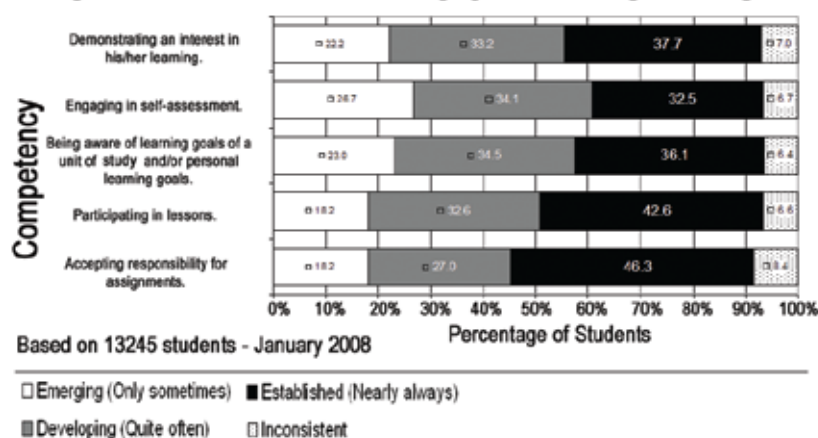
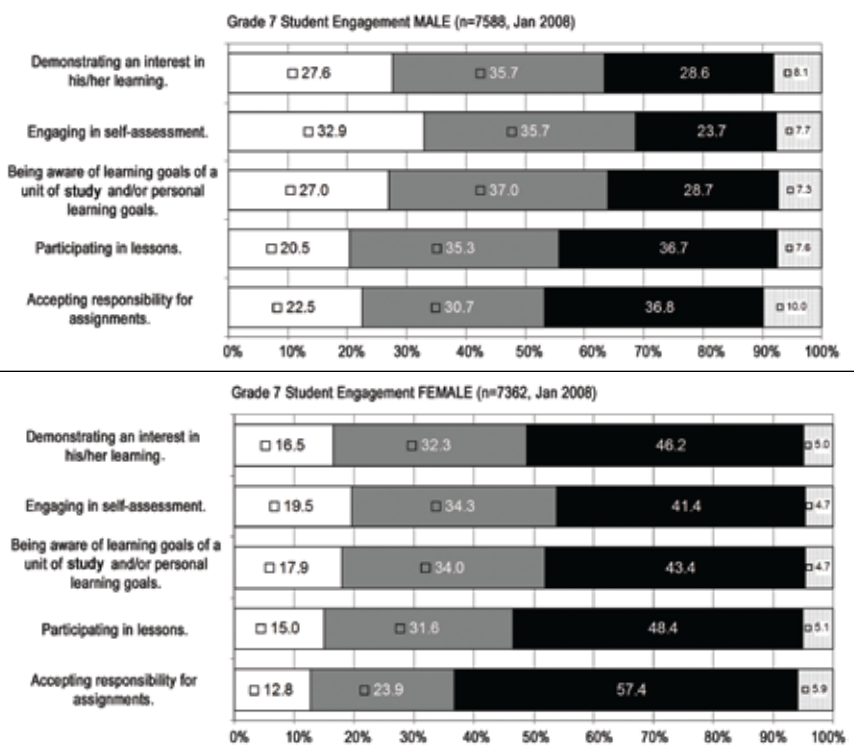


Figure 2 - Grade 7 Student Engagement Results by Gender, January 2008



result is heartening, but there are also areas to target for improvement.

The next step is to look more closely and make particular observations to target improvements. Again taking broad strokes, about one in five grade seven students are “only sometimes” interested, reflective, goal-oriented, willing to participate, and responsible for their work. Schools must pay particular attention to this twenty percent, as they may be at risk of struggling, giving up, and dropping out.

The process might then make observations about particular competencies to find areas to target for improvement. For instance, the highest proportion of students rated “Established” in the English program came on the “accepting responsibility for assignments.” Nearly half (46 percent) of the students achieved this rating from their teachers. However, more than one quarter of students (26.7 percent) were reported to engage in self-assessment “only sometimes.” Perhaps self-assessment is one area that schools could examine together with students and parents.

Examining result by gender

Levin’s report recommended that “schools and divisions should attempt to disaggregate assessment results for target groups” such as gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status (page 6). Faculty can make observations on the data, speculate on possible reasons for trends and patterns, and set goals for improvement.

Take the provincial results for gender as an example. Perhaps most observers would have predicted girls would be more engaged than boys in their learning in grade seven. Other studies, such as the High School Survey of Student Engagement, have reported a gender gap wherein girls were more engaged than boys (Yazzie-Mintz, 2006, p. 8). In any case, how many would have predicted the degree of difference that is evident in Figure 2? In every category of the assessment, girls in larger numbers than boys were rated as “Established (nearly always)”. Some of these differences represent large gaps. For example, teachers reported that girls were much more likely to demonstrate an interest in their learning. Nearly half of girls (47 percent) in the English program were rated as “Established (nearly always), while only twenty-nine percent (28.9 percent) of boys were given

this top rating. Another example from the data reveals that fifty-seven percent (57 percent) of girls nearly always accepted responsibility for assignments. Boys were far less likely (36.4 percent) to accept responsibility consistently. School learning communities and school division leadership teams could consider these gender differences and other difference they might find by disaggregating the data. They should have rich discussions based on their own data, and formulate specific goals to address gaps.

School division responses to the engagement assessment

While the two scenarios in the sidebar are fictional, Assistant Deputy Ministers Anne Longston and Jean-Vianney Auclair did engage in conversations with

superintendents in all of Manitoba’s school divisions in 2007 to find out about how divisions were using assessment data to improve student learning. Most school divisions reported that teachers were generally receptive to the assessment of student engagement. Several school division leaders identified the need to gather more information about how consistently teachers have assessed engagement, noting some inherent room for subjectivity between school buildings. However, several commented that the data ignited conversations that connect well to reforms that were already ongoing in instruction and assessment.

This past school year (2007-2008) was the first year of full implementation

What might conversations about data from the grade 7 assessment of student engagement sound like? Here are two hypothetical scenarios showing how teachers use engagement results.

Scenario #1 – Living Prairie Middle School

Living Prairie Middle School teachers noted a pronounced gender gap in their school engagement results. The grade seven faculty’s professional learning community decided to focus on the low results for boys in self-assessment. Mary did some research and found evidence that gender differences in self-assessment were particularly correlated with meta-cognitive abilities associated with reading (Van Krayenoord and Paris, 1997). Based on Mary’s evidence, the team made a plan to focus on increasing boys’ awareness of their reading strategies across subject areas. They also looked for ways boys could use these same strategies to reread and revise their own written assignments. This way, Living Prairie hoped to close the engagement gender gap.

Scenario #2 – Sterling Lyon Junior High School

Assistant superintendent Rachel Laurent visits each school and invites teachers to have a conversation around the results of the middle years assessment. Kelly, a teacher from Sterling Lyon Junior High School, raises a concern about the low results in “demonstrating an interest in learning”. To investigate ways to address these results, Kelly asks Rachel to arrange a visit to a classroom where a teacher is generating more interest among students. Two weeks later, Kelly visits Ashok’s classroom, observes his teaching practice for a day, interviews students, and examines assignments and work samples. Kelly notices that Ashok’s students are given more choice in either the content or the format of their assignments. His students also work more frequently and effectively in collaborative groups than her own students. Ashok says he was influenced especially by Phillip Schlechty’s *Working on the Work: Making Student Engagement Central*, which he had picked up from the government education library. Kelly explored choice and collaboration as ways she could improve her own students’ engagement.

These two scenarios demonstrate the process of using the engagement data to direct inquiry into teaching. These teachers:

- Made observations of the data;
- Identified a priority;
- Found more information;
- Implemented changes; and
- Monitored results.

of the middle years assessment policy and the first year that student engagement was assessed. As teachers and students become more familiar with the assessment process, consistency will improve and together we will develop a better understanding of how to use the data to support teaching and learning. The Assistant Deputy Ministers will continue to meet with superintendents this year and in the future to carry on the conversations around assessment and student engagement.

Conclusion

Does this data really matter? Is anyone surprised some early adolescent boys aren't passionate about learning? Whichever the observations about engagement teachers target for improvement, much of school engagement can be linked to a sense of connectedness. Connectedness within social contexts, particularly to

family, school and peers, is associated with several health measures among Canadian youth. A comprehensive approach to healthy youth development that emphasizes and increases positive relationships in these contexts may facilitate the transition of Canadian youth into a healthy adulthood. (Yugo & Davidson, 2007, 53).

Students who are engaged at school will make a stronger transition into adulthood and lead healthier lives. Students who learn to assess their own work will become employees

who care about quality in the workplace. Students who become interested in their own learning will become parents who are interested in their children's learning. The grade 7 assessment provincial assessment gives Manitobans one opportunity for important conversations that will celebrate connectedness and help address the gaps. ■

Warren Nickerson is a Consultant with Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth.

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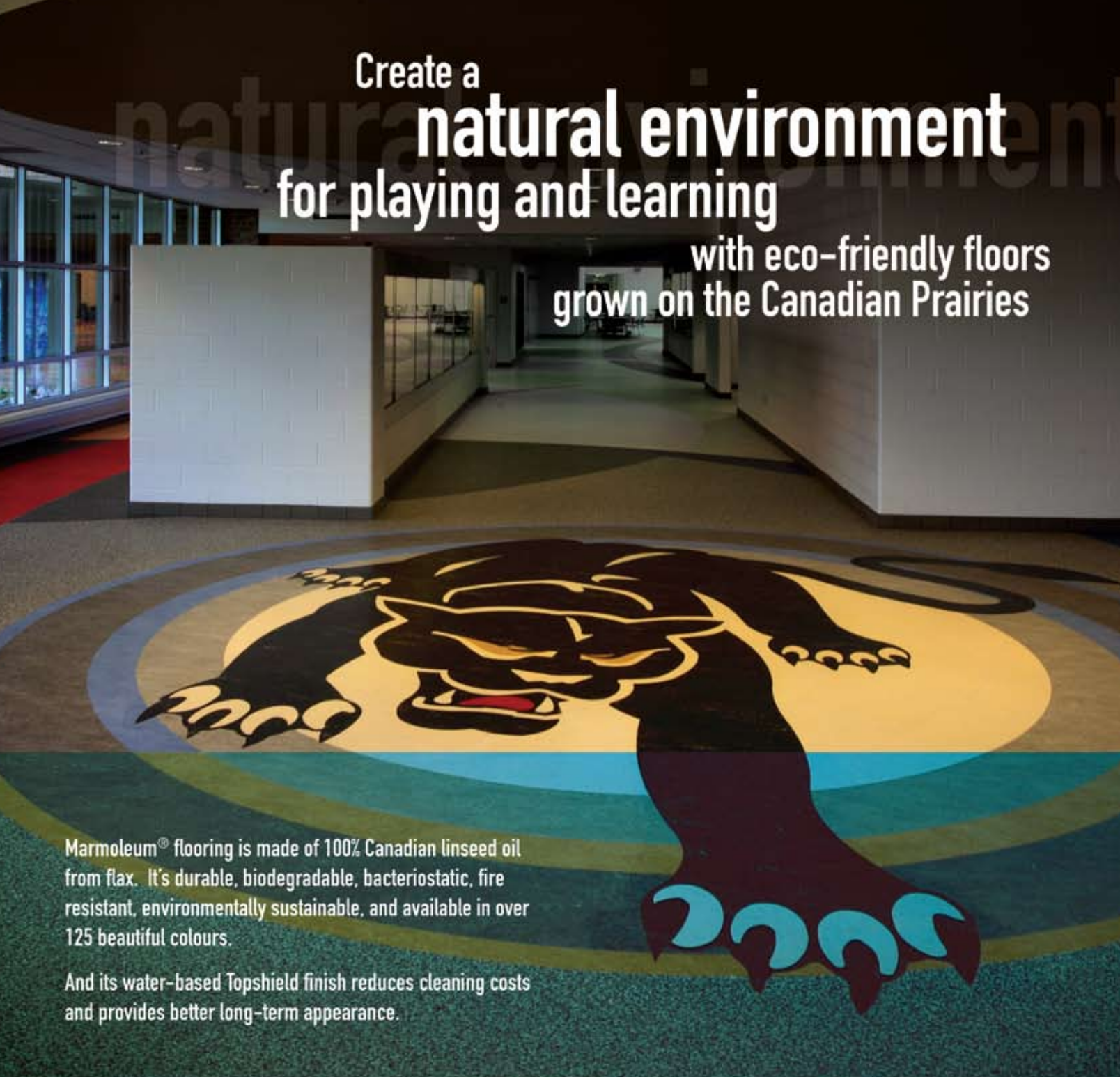


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