

# RESEARCH REPORT

## Proposal for Change: Student Engagement in Turtle Mountain School Division

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### **Abstract**

*School leadership teams are struggling with student disengagement and how to support educators in their efforts to increase student engagement. As the Assistant Superintendent of Turtle Mountain School Division (TMSD), I want educators to self-evaluate their educational practice and make changes to ensure that their teaching is supported by current research. A group of ten teachers who have engaging classroom practices completed a questionnaire about their thoughts on student engagement: what it is, what they do to engage students, how they know that students are engaged, and what they describe as the key ingredients for encouraging student engagement. The teachers created a definition of student engagement, and five themes of how to nurture student engagement emerged: building relationships, creating a safe classroom culture, providing opportunity for student choice, differentiating instruction, and having high expectations of their students. The findings of the questionnaire will be used as a part of a divisional mentorship program for new teachers.*

Poor attendance. Failing grades. Disrespectful behaviour. Apathetic attitude. Every day, educators face students who are disengaged and unmotivated at school. School leadership teams struggle with how to support educators in their efforts to increase student engagement. In an effort to effect change in this area, Turtle Mountain School Division's 2016-2020 strategic plan states that two of its priorities are to "encourage students to be active, motivated, and fully engaged learners and align student experiences to facilitate success in an ever-changing world" (TMSD, 2016). Manitoba Education and Training (2010) has outlined that there is "a need and a desire to transform . . . education in Manitoba. Educators consider the improvement of student engagement in school as the main goal and outcome of the transformation" (p. 7). Engaged students are more likely to achieve success in school and in life.

Teacher behaviours and attitudes have an impact on student engagement. A group of ten teachers completed a questionnaire on student engagement: what it is, what they do to engage students, how they know that students are engaged, and what they describe as the key ingredients for encouraging student engagement. Results of the questionnaire were synthesized into five themes: building relationships, fostering a positive classroom culture, allowing student choice, differentiating instruction, and hold high expectations of student ability and achievement. Each of these themes provide a way for administrators and educators to nurture student engagement to support them as students –

accept appropriate responsibility for their learning and assignments, demonstrate an interest in their learning, develop and maintain positive attitudes towards school subjects and school in general, make choices when doing assignments, engage in self-reflection, self-assessment, and goal setting, engage in conversations about what they are learning, and participate in classroom and school activities. (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2007, p. 17)

## Purpose of the Study

Turtle Mountain School Division is a small school division, and within the next five years will have a significant turnover of staff; the division hired ten new teachers in May, 2016. Developing a mentorship program will ensure that staff will have opportunity to participate in discussions about school division and provincial priorities, model best practices in their classrooms, and be actively involved in their professional development.

Student engagement was chosen as the theme of the questionnaire that teachers answered because it is an important topic identified by teachers, the school division, and Manitoba Education and Training. The questionnaire was a method to collect data on teacher beliefs and practices and have a conversation about student engagement, focusing on the four components of the divisional mentorship program.

The first component of the mentorship program is to guarantee that school division priorities are understood by teachers and are being demonstrated in the classroom. Turtle Mountain School Division (2016), in consultation with key stakeholders, has identified four priorities in its 2016-2020 Strategic Plan, which are to encourage students to be active, motivated, and fully engaged learners; facilitate improvements in literacy and numeracy for all students; enhance the board's communication strategies across stakeholder groups, and align student experiences to facilitate success in an ever-changing world. Since student engagement is one of the four pillars of the division's strategic plan, this study was completed as a way to find out if teachers are matching their practice with divisional goals.

The second component of the mentorship program is to establish that educators are aware of and practising Manitoba Education and Training (2010) outcomes. The province has identified the importance of developing student engagement in its 2007 document, *Middle Years Assessment: Grade 7 Student Engagement*, as well as through the provincial assessment of student engagement. The province has suggested that educators can effectively engage students by developing a deeper understanding of students, providing for more responsive teaching and learning experiences, nurture stronger learning relationships, increasing student voice and choice, and strengthening involvement of the community (Manitoba Education and Training, 2010). The questionnaire that teachers responded to was a way of measuring their understanding of provincial expectations.

The third component of the mentorship program is to ensure that teachers in Turtle Mountain School Division are aligning their educational practice with current research.<sup>1</sup> Are teachers aware of the most recent understandings of best practice? Is their teaching reflecting that awareness? Some examples of best practices that are supported by research are teacher effect on student engagement; assessing for learning, as learning, and of learning; and using differentiated instruction to support all students. If teachers are supported in using data from research to guide their instruction, the expectation is that teachers are also using data from summative and formative assessments to guide their teaching practices.

The final component of the mentorship program is for teachers to be actively involved in their professional development. This program allows for teachers to learn from one another, to individually assess their teaching practices and beliefs, and to be proactive agents of change.

## Interview Protocol

The questionnaire was created with the purpose of developing a divisional mentorship program. Since this was the first step toward development of the mentorship program, the first decision to be made was how to pick teachers who would be considered as mentors. Working with the superintendent, divisional literacy and numeracy coach, and administrators, it was decided that mentors had to have a minimum of five years teaching experience, display a

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<sup>1</sup> This summary of the research report does not include references to the literature.

growth-mindset, exhibit leadership characteristics, be a team player, and have engaging classroom environments. It was determined that only ten teachers would be identified and participate in the questionnaire to make the study small and manageable.

Another intent of the questionnaire was to discover whether educators were able to appropriately define and describe student engagement and whether any themes emerged that would be supported by current research. To meet those requirements, the questions were formulated by the divisional literacy and numeracy coach and myself and edited by graduate summative seminar instructor, Dr. Symons. The following questions were developed:

1. If you could describe student engagement in just one word or phrase, what would that be?
2. Based on your experience and understanding, please provide a definition of student engagement.
3. What are the top five indicators of an engaged student?
4. What does an engaged student look like in your classroom?
5. What do you do in your teaching and classroom to promote student engagement?
6. What do you believe is the most important factor in fostering student engagement? Explain why you think so.

The choice was made to distribute the questionnaire via Google Forms. This procedure gave teachers time to articulate their responses. Electronically submitting responses in Google Forms facilitated quick data collection. Participants were each given a number, so as to eliminate bias that could have been created if their names had been used.

## **Results of the Study**

### **Definition**

The results of the TMSD Student Engagement Form revealed that the participants had an understanding that matched with Manitoba Education and Training's (2010) definition of student engagement. Teachers expressed that student engagement is multifaceted and is comprised of cognitive, affective, and behavioural components. Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (2007) described cognitive engagement as student understandings about their learning, affective engagement as student feelings about school, and behavioural engagement as student actions.

One participant described cognitive engagement as being "actively involved in their learning. It stems from a level of curiosity, interest, and excitement in the topic, as well as a level of student input and control in the direction of exploration." Another said that students "are meta-cognitively engaged, visualizing, and questioning and connecting with knowledge and its application." Another described cognitive engagement as "thinking, questioning, visualizing, predicting, and making connections with the world, with previous knowledge and acknowledging new connections they make while learning."

One participant of the questionnaire depicted affective engagement as "students should be positively interacting with peers discussing learning that is taking place; taking pride in what they are learning about; positive relationships should be built between students, peers, teachers, and other adults in the room." Another definition given for affective engagement was "the student's willingness, need, desire to participate and be successful in the learning process."

Questionnaire participants identified behavioural engagement as being present while learning and displaying attention, curiosity, and passion. Behaviourally engaged students try harder to find the answer even when it is an obstacle. They are active, not passive, in their own learning. The participants' definitions of student engagement correspond with the Province of

Manitoba's definition. This was important to establish because their understanding of the topic was accurate and they were operating from a common understanding of student engagement.

## **Characteristics of Engaged Students**

Students who are engaged exhibit several characteristics, made visible in how they behave and in how they complete assignments and assessments. Participants in the *TMSD Student Engagement Questionnaire* described engaged students as happy, enthusiastic, excited about the work they are doing, and enjoying the learning process. The students make the effort to construct meaning, are focused on tasks, use active listening skills, take risks, and demonstrate critical thinking. Engaged students also feel a sense of belonging and have positive relationships with their peers and teachers. These students participate in discussions, ask questions, and take an active role in learning and participation. The descriptors of engaged students paint a picture of students who want to be at school, desire to learn, participate and collaborate with others, and are actively involved, as they make learning enjoyable and applicable.

## **Five Themes**

Analysis of the *TMSD Student Engagement Questionnaire* revealed five themes that are related to ways that teachers can nurture student engagement. The themes are relationships, safe environment, student choice, differentiated instruction, and high expectations.

### *Relationships*

The major theme identified by participants was the importance of having an authentic relationship with students. Manitoba Education and Training (2010) stated that student engagement is encouraged when educators “nurture stronger learning relationships among students, peers, and educators” (p. 2). One participant shared that “getting to know and building a relationship with each kid in your classroom is pivotal to motivate, encourage, and guide them to success – everything else comes after a relationship is established.” Another wrote, “Students won't become engaged if they don't feel wanted and welcome and heard and loved in my classroom. They need to feel like their lives are important, and they are valued while they are at school.” Another participant stated that building meaningful relationships with students “immediately enhances importance and connection to material.” Focusing on relationship-building increases student effort and focus in class. A teacher shared, “If you have positive relationships with students and they know that you care about them, they will hear what you are saying out of sheer respect.” Students will be engaged cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally when teachers foster authentic relationships with them.

### *Safe Environment*

Another factor that was identified as promoting student engagement is to have a classroom culture that is a safe place for students to take risks. Teachers should “create a safe learning environment and classroom culture where it's ok to make mistakes or not know the answers.” Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth (2007) stated that one aspect of student engagement is “supporting the development of age-appropriate understandings about their role as students” (p. 17).

One participant described attempting “to create a dynamic learning environment where all learners are comfortable both emotionally and physically.” Participants identified that when they establish their classroom as a safe place, students feel confident, take risks, and focus on what they can do. A participant indicated the importance of how their students “feel safe enough to

get up and ‘play’ along, take chances, and get involved.” When students feel that they are in a safe place, they will be engaged in their learning.

### *Student Choice*

Another theme that emerged in the questionnaire was the importance of allowing students to have choice and a voice in the classroom. Manitoba Education and Training (2010) highlighted that educators must “increase opportunities for student voice and choice and support young adolescents in becoming more independent and responsible for their own learning” (p. 2). One teacher identified the importance of providing student choice, assisting students in making connections between content and students so they can build that relationship, and encouraging students to lead the direction wherever possible. When students are given choice and opportunity to take the lead in their education, their level of engagement will increase because they are taking ownership of their learning.

The survey participants noted that they “promote student engagement by gearing lessons, activities, and projects to the needs and interests of their students.” Students who have a choice in their learning will be engaged learners because their individual needs are being met in the classroom.

### *Differentiated Instruction*

Engaging teachers “provide teaching and learning experiences that are more responsive to the developmental needs of young adolescents” (Manitoba Education and Training, 2010, p. 2). Individual students are unique and have learning styles that are distinctive to them. Teachers nurture student engagement by responding to their individual needs through movement, music, etc. One way to provide differentiated instruction is to use Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences, which involve eight learning styles: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist.

Another important differentiated instruction technique that teachers employ is collaborative grouping. Participants identified that they place students in groups that they can be supported and successful in, and the groups may be large, small, or pairs. Collaborative grouping enables students to learn from one another and takes into account their strengths and challenges.

Technology use is another strategy that promotes student engagement. Teachers described how they integrate technology, such as games and apps to reinforce concepts. Technology use is planned with purpose and used as a teaching and assessment tool, not as a gimmick or novelty.

The last differentiated instruction strategy that teachers discussed was the importance of making connections between course objectives and the real world. Connecting lessons to real life provides a context for curricular outcomes and helps students to make a personal connection to what they are learning.

### *High Expectations*

The final theme that came from the questionnaire was that teachers have high expectations of their students and provide support for their students to achieve at high levels. Manitoba Education and Training (2010) stated, “The high expectations teachers set for all students translate into high expectations that students set for themselves and result in improved engagement and higher student achievement” (p. 30). The participants indicated that they expected students to ask questions, make connections, extend learning on their own initiative, be critical, analytical, and evaluative. Educators set the bar high, but believe that students can reach the bar and provide support and scaffolding to assist student efforts.

One teacher wrote, "I let students know I believe in them, that learning is tough, but it's great tough and it can be done together." The teacher was willing to work with the students and model that hard work is necessary and an important part of the journey. Another participant stated that student engagement "comes with setting high enough expectations and making sure students know that I know they can do it!" When teachers set high standards, believe that students can achieve those standards, and provide appropriate support, students will be successful and engaged in their learning.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation of this study is that there was a bias in the group of teachers who were selected to complete the questionnaire: they were all identified as engaging teachers. What would the results have been if teachers had been selected at random? Another limitation of this study is that the questions focused on the positives of student engagement and did not provide opportunity to discuss challenges. Finally, there were aspects of engagement, such as humour and classroom furniture and arrangement, that were not discussed in this report because, although important, they were not identified by the majority of questionnaire participants.

### **Conclusion**

Turtle Mountain School Division has identified the importance of cultivating student engagement. Research discusses the important effect that teachers have on student engagement and success. The TMSD Student Engagement Form revealed that teacher philosophies and practices are supported by current research. Student engagement was defined as students being engaged cognitively, affectively, and behaviourally – and was described through positive student behaviours, such as paying attention, asking questions, and participating in class.

In the questionnaire, participants identified five themes that are vital for teachers to enact in order to encourage student engagement: build relationships, have a positive classroom culture, provide student choice, differentiate instruction, and hold high expectations of students. The teachers who participated in the questionnaire model their beliefs in their daily practice. Moving forward, they will be sharing their expertise about student engagement with new teachers, to ensure that all students are supported for their success in each of Turtle Mountain School Division's classrooms.

### **References**

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### **About the Author**

*Grant is in his second year as the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services in Turtle Mountain School Division, after twenty years as a classroom and resource teacher. He and his wife Corrie have four children: Elora, McCanna, Lucia, and Ranon. In his spare time, Grant plays guitar, sings, and golfs.*