

“Schools can no longer pretend to be one-size fits all organizations . . . what we really need is a bigger menu, one that expands our options in dealing with all aspects of a child’s existence—academic, of course, but also emotional, social, behavioural and physical, as well [T]his will require changes in how we’re taught to teach and the degree to which we are willing to come together to bring a range of expertise and ideas to a child’s life. It will, in short, require a change to what schools are.”

~ Jane Bluestein (333)

Why Do We Need to Transform Middle Years Education?

The current reality of Middle Years education in Manitoba as well as student and educator feedback at interviews and educational forums indicate a need and a desire to transform Middle Years education in Manitoba. Educators consider the improvement of student engagement in school as the main goal and outcome of the transformation. Students who are more fully engaged in school are more likely to stay in school, to attend school regularly, and to discover and reach their full potential.

Because young adolescents spend a large part of their day in school, it is the responsibility of those entrusted with their care to support and educate adolescents in a learning environment that is safe, challenging, and engaging, and where adolescents feel they belong.

According to the study *Young People in Canada: Their Health and Well-Being* (E. M. Anderman, cited in Klinger 35), young people’s behaviour and self-perceptions are closely related to the quality of their lives in school. This study reports that by Grade 8 only 21% of girls and 16% of boys reported “liking school a lot” (Klinger 41). Furthermore, 52% of girls and 54% of boys reported “teachers were interested in them,” and only 72% of girls and 70% of boys reported “most of their teachers were friendly” (Klinger 43). Similarly, a study of “High Level School Connectedness” in British Columbia by the McCreary Centre Society reports a serious lack of school connection at all grades. Results indicate a sharp drop in high level connectedness from 23% in Grade 7 to 7% in Grade 10, with a slight rise to 12% in Grade 12.

Additional studies indicate that 120,000 high school students in Canada drop out of school each year, comprising 18% of the high school population (Statistics Canada, cited in Canadian Centre for Adolescent Research). More than 30% of these students had A or B averages and only 10% had D or F averages before leaving. Of those who dropped out, 22% did so because they did not find school challenging enough.

The sharp decline in school connectedness for many adolescent students indicates that the time to prevent high school leaving is at the Middle Years. To secure and strengthen student commitment to school and to learning, it is necessary to have a shared understanding of student engagement.

What Is Student Engagement?

Student engagement, a hallmark of sound Middle Years education, is generally understood as securing student commitment to school and to learning (Norris, Pignal, and Lipps 27). Engagement reflects “the meaning students give to the tasks and activities their teachers encourage them to undertake” (Schlechty 9). With improved engagement comes improved learning, and with improved learning comes improved self-esteem and commitment to school and community.

The Canadian Education Association identifies three dimensions of student engagement: social engagement, academic engagement, and intellectual engagement. *Social engagement* is described as “a sense of belonging and participation in school life.” *Academic engagement* is described as “participation in the formal requirements of schooling.” *Intellectual engagement* is described as “a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher-order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge” (Willms, Friesen, and Milton 1). Each type of engagement recognizes the importance of striking the right balance between a teacher’s high expectations and the learner’s abilities and interests and is supported by classroom practices and environment.

Full understanding of student engagement may be complicated by behaviours such as compliance, retreatism, and rebellion. Although *compliance* is both desirable and necessary in the learning environment, it may sometimes reflect a student’s desire to stay out of trouble or be successful at tasks not genuinely valued, rather than reflect true engagement. At other times, compliance may be motivated by extrinsic rewards or the desire to get by and get along in order to avoid unpleasant consequences, and may be an indicator of obedience rather than engagement (Schlechty 3–17).

STUDENT VOICES

“Learning is like when someone unlocks the door into my brain. My creativity is unlocked and ideas spring out.”

“I often become engaged in my learning when we take the time to . . . talk about what we’ve learned or what we want to learn.”

“I’m happier now because I have a better relationship with my teacher. I’m trying harder to talk to her . . . I know what the teacher’s expectations are of my work and I’m trying to reach [those expectations]. I want to be proud of myself.”

“Often I feel engaged in learning when we have class discussions about a topic. It is then that learning changes from being some adult telling you stuff, to learning being an opportunity to delve into a wonderful world of knowledge.”

Retreatism and rebellion are two behaviours that may indicate a more serious lack of engagement. *Retreatism* is the withdrawal from a task, activity, or experience, and may go unnoticed when a student becomes more engaged with the teacher than with the task at hand. *Rebellion*, on the other hand, is an overt rejection of a task, activity, or experience, and is accompanied by the replacement of a preferred task, activity, or experience. Most teachers recognize and address rebellion when it occurs, but may not be as attuned to recognizing and addressing retreatism (Schlechty 12–13).

“A widespread problem facing educators today is the emotional, intellectual and physical withdrawal of students from school.”

~ K. E. Voelkl (cited in Norris, Pignal, and Lipps 25)

Manitoba Education recognizes the importance of securing student commitment to learning, and has consequently included student engagement as a focus of Middle Years assessment initiatives and support documents (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, *Middle Years Assessment Policy: Student Engagement*).

Current data from Manitoba Education’s Middle Years student engagement reports and the results from Canadian Education Association studies (Dunleavy; Willms, Friesen, and Milton) indicate that student engagement warrants closer examination, particularly among the 20% of students who may be at risk of struggling, giving up, or dropping out (Nickerson 32–34). These studies indicate that during the Middle Years students may begin to disengage, temporarily or even permanently, from the educational system. Any initiatives that Middle Years schools can implement to increase the engagement of their learners can significantly strengthen adolescents’ commitment to school and future learning.

Manitoba educators who understand young adolescents and who pay attention to the realities and challenges young adolescents face at home, at school, and in their communities, are better able to engage their adolescent learners more fully. Teachers who recognize the signs of non-engagement are better able to plan and apply interventions to improve engagement for all learners. An important key action, therefore, in improving student engagement is to develop a deeper understanding of young adolescents.

STUDENT VOICES

“I am challenged [in my learning] when the teacher tells me to push it further in something I’m good at.”

“Sometimes it is hard to live up to everyone’s expectations—parents, teachers . . . I feel disappointed when I can’t live up to them . . . I want to do better but it’s hard to push myself because I keep running into a brick wall. I need to try and deal with one problem at a time instead of everything at once.”
