

Principals Want to Know

A tip sheet for principals that focuses on practical issues faced in schools.

Drawn from existing resources, these tips are designed to support instructional leadership practice.

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Engaging Students

The Question:

“We know that when students are disengaged they aren’t ready to learn. Are there some tips for increasing students’ engagement in school?”

The Answer:

Yes. Here are five Tips for Success:

1. Think about different types of engagement
2. Encourage proven classroom strategies to improve engagement
3. Strengthen student advocacy and support
4. Reassess the extracurricular program
5. Ask students what they need

1. THINK ABOUT DIFFERENT TYPES OF ENGAGEMENT

Willms et al (2009) in their report [What did you do in school today?](#) identify three types of engagement:

- **Social Engagement** – having a sense of belonging and participation in school life
- **Academic Engagement** – participating in the formal requirements of schooling, and
- **Intellectual Engagement** – making a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning.

Actions to improve student engagement in your school require attention to one or more of these three areas. Sometimes these actions will involve the staff as a whole to change school culture in ways that better meet student needs and interests; other actions will be more closely tied to the nature of classroom instruction. So improving student engagement starts with staff engagement.

“At our school, we started from the belief that all students are capable of learning and all teachers are capable of making changes in their practice and in the lives of their students.”

Principal Congress 2011 participant

2. ENCOURAGE PROVEN CLASSROOM STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE ENGAGEMENT

Willms et al identify five classroom practices that make a difference:

1. **Design intentionally for today’s world** — designs that deepen understanding and open the disciplines to genuine inquiry
2. **Make it mean something** — relevant, meaningful, authentic – worthy of their time and attention

“Students do not want learning made easy, they want it to mean something. They want to feel something, to be moved by what they learn: they want to connect deeply with things that matter to the world and matter to them; and they want the chance to make a difference.”

What did you do in school today? (2009)

3. **Use assessment to improve learning and guide teaching** – assessments that enable students to think deeply about their own learning, to collect their thoughts, articulate what they have found and speculate about where they might go
4. **Build relationships** – a positive classroom climate that creates a trusting, respectful, low-risk environment
5. **Improve teaching practice in the company of peers** – frequent conversations centred on the work, access to each other’s classrooms and common planning time. Look at *PW2K # 5: Moving to Public Practice* for ideas of how to do this.

Look for: clips of Willms’ keynote address at Principal Congress and an interview with him in *In Conversation*, available at: www.ontario.ca/eduleadership

3. STRENGTHEN STUDENT ADVOCACY AND SUPPORTS

Research shows that in a typical school, about 25 per cent of all students have low engagement. Schools need to know who these students are and regularly check and connect. Look for students who are low achievers, have behaviour problems or may be suffering from anxiety and depression. Staff should look for warning signs of withdrawal. At Principal Congress 2011, keynote speaker Douglas Willms identified the following actions for schools:

- Identify advocates for disengaged students, who often do not have an adult they can turn to for advice
- Help students to become involved with school through clubs, sports and volunteer activities
- Check in daily with students who display behaviour problems – work on problem-solving skills, celebrate successes and help develop positive friendships
- Develop effective programs to deal with bullying, exclusion and sexual harassment
- Develop school-wide and individual interventions to help those suffering from anxiety or depression.

For secondary schools, a number of strategies to help students achieve have been launched: Specialist High Skills Majors, Expanded Co-op programs, Lighthouse Projects for struggling students, e-learning programs, Dual Credit Programs, and transition programs for grades 7, 8 and 9 students. More information about these programs is found in the [Student Success Program](#) brochure.

4. REASSESS THE EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAM

Most schools already have a roster of extracurricular activities, but upon examination you may find that students who have joined up are not part of the 25 per cent of disengaged students. Douglas Willms challenged Principal Congress 2011 participants to consider setting the goal of getting every student in the school involved in at least one activity. What would it take to do this?

- Consider new types of activities that might appeal to otherwise disengaged students – perhaps ones that don't require "trying out for the team or group" or ones that encourage creativity and artistic interests.

- Look at how student accomplishments are celebrated in your school – are awards and ceremonies just for the high achievers or are there ways to celebrate unique undiscovered talents that don't normally get the headlines?

"Every year in our school's annual celebration of student achievements I look hard for unrecognized talent, especially among students who have exhibited behaviour problems or academic difficulties. I won't forget the look of pride in one such student's eyes, when I unveiled, in front of the whole school, a piece of artwork he had completed that showed much promise."

Secondary School Principal

- Encourage students to suggest their own extracurricular activities and help them find a staff sponsor. Be open to new ideas. Take a look at Tip #5 below to see how to encourage student input.

5. ASK STUDENTS WHAT THEY NEED

Participants at Principal Congress 2011, which focused on student engagement, frequently talked about their efforts to increase student voice. They used focus groups and surveys to find out what students thought about their school and how it could be better. Take a look at PW2K #4: *Student Voice Initiative* for some resources.

They also encouraged teachers to design lessons based on student needs and interests.

"We have found that when students can articulate not only their learning style but their strengths and needs, they are more engaged in their learning, feel more empowered and begin to advocate for themselves."

Principal Congress 2011 participant

You can learn much more by reading the original source listed in the reference that follows. Add your own thoughts by joining the Ontario Education Leaders network: <http://ontarioeducationleaders.ning.com>

REFERENCE

Willms, J.D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P. (2009). *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic and intellectual engagement.* (First National Report) Toronto: Canadian Education Association

