Tell Them From Me Surveys

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a large comparative study of 15-year old students conducted in over 40 countries, revealed a curious paradox for Canadian students. Canadian students ranked among the top 3 countries in reading literacy, yet had an exceptionally high prevalence of students who were disengaged from school. Canada ranked 22nd out of 28 countries in students' level of participation. It also fared poorly on a measure of students' sense of belonging.

These discouraging findings led Doug Willms and Patrick Flanagan to develop a school evaluation system, Tell Them From Me (TTFM), which provides leading indicators of student engagement and wellness, as well as classroom and school climate during the middle and high school years. This anonymous, user-friendly, web-based assessment system meets the needs of school and district staff for timely, reliable, transparent results. TTFM includes a dynamic web-based student survey and optional teacher and parent surveys, which together assess 16 student outcomes pertaining to student engagement and wellness, and 15 aspects of classroom and school learning climate that are known to affect learning outcomes.

A random selection of students completes the survey regularly over the school year, in some schools as a twice-yearly snapshot, in other schools as frequently as every week. Every student in a school has the opportunity to voice his or her views. The school's results on 21 student-level indicators are updated with each new survey submitted. In addition, student responses to open-ended questions are accessible to the school principal every month. This creates a system for continuous feedback that enables school and district staff to respond immediately to specific concerns and assess whether school reforms and interventions are having their intended effect.

Schools that score high on the five measures of classroom and school climate - effective learning time, disciplinary climate of the classroom, expectations for academic success, teacher-student relations, and student advocacy - tend to have fewer disaffected students. Similar findings are evident for the other measures of student engagement, which include participation in school sports and clubs, truancy, aspirations to pursue a post-secondary diploma or degree, and the extent to which students value schooling outcomes. Schools vary substantially on these measures of engagement, and each of them is strongly correlated with the measures of school climate.

The emotional, social, spiritual and physical health of children and youth are also closely tied to their engagement in school life and their learning outcomes. TTFM includes six indicators of student health and wellness, including anxiety, depression and self-esteem. The TTFM findings support other research that indicates that students with positive mental health and high levels of self-esteem are more likely to be engaged at school.

Since 2005, over 60,000 students in 200 schools across Canada have participated in the TTFM survey. Several graduate students and other researchers are currently using the database to further our understanding of student engagement and of school climate.


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Researchers wishing to conduct research using anonymous TTFM data can contact us at crisp@unb.ca. Copyright © 2007 UNB Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy (CRISP). All Rights Reserved.

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