



Good Schools
to
Great Schools



Superintendent's Annual Report to Staff 2009

Dear Staff,

It is a great pleasure to share with you information about our ongoing efforts to create a network of 137 great schools in the Halifax Regional School Board.

Last year, I reflected on the first five years of our work toward this goal.¹ I looked at a variety of data, including feedback from you, and concluded that our commitment to improved student learning and achievement was making a big difference in schools and classrooms throughout the board. Credit for our achievements since 2003 goes directly to teachers, administrators, and other staff who bring our vision for improvement to life in our schools each and every day of the school year.

We have all learned some important lessons since we first began our journey toward improvement. We now understand the power of a collective focus on student achievement and collaborative action in areas that will have the greatest impact on student learning. We have also experienced the success of a school-based model of professional development that reflects individual staff goals for professional learning and schools' goals for improvement.

Most of all, we have grown to appreciate that achieving a bold vision for students through board and school *Planning for Improvement* is a continuous journey that requires a great deal of persistence and support. My vision for the next five years is to see every school in the HRSB become an improving school.

By 2013, every school in the Halifax Regional School Board will demonstrate improvement in student learning. Every student can learn. Every school will improve.



Reaching this goal requires a commitment from everyone in our school system to support our schools in becoming the best they can be for the students they serve every day. We need to continue using strategies that have proven successful to date, but we also need to go deeper until we have created a swell of change that is strong enough to make a lasting difference in every school, every classroom, and in the life of every student in the board.

As I welcomed in the new school year with school administrators in August, I left them with a message that I think is also relevant to the work you do every day in our schools: *We have to believe in the fundamental value of each child and their ability to learn in spite of any challenges they may face. We can never forget that we have the power to shape futures and build dreams. I believe every child can learn, and I believe in your ability to help each one of them to become truly successful learners.*

Charting a Course for Improvement

Using a variety of data about student achievement and practices that promote a strong learning climate to make evidence-based decisions is a powerful driver of change in the HRSB. We know more now about student learning and achievement than we ever have in the past.

As we chart our continued course, the data we have collected over the last five years helps us to understand that improvement means something very different for every school and classroom. We know that each school has unique strengths and challenges. A school's context and the diverse learning needs of the students it serves will lead to a range of goals for improvement and a need for different types of support along the way.

We remain firmly committed to measuring improvement within schools, not among them. Above all else, data are tools for making decisions about classroom instruction. But data (as well as how we interpret and report it) also help us meet other responsibilities as a publicly funded school system. Indeed, as Superintendent, I am accountable to the public for demonstrating that schools are working for *all* students and the board is making the most of its resources to support high-quality teaching and learning.

We also need to collect and use a variety of data to make system-level decisions that are more effective for students. In the past, we relied on a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting schools. For many years now, we have known that this approach does not work because the needs of each school are unique. This year I am reporting in a summary fashion the progress of all of

¹ Halifax Regional School Board, *Good Schools to Great Schools. Superintendent's Annual Report*, May 2008. http://www.hrsb.ns.ca/files/Downloads/pdf/reports/annual-reports/Superintendent_Report_08_Long.pdf



our 137 schools. The data are compiled from reports to the community that each school sent home in October. These results—and other data collected through surveys and school community reports—help the board to understand the specific needs and strengths of individual schools in addition to overall trends in the system. In turn, they provide a powerful tool for us to begin accumulating knowledge about effective practices and directing targeted support to areas of learning and the students that need it the most.

Building a Strong Foundation for Literacy in the HRSB

Each fall, schools receive detailed results from the board’s literacy assessments. These results help classroom teachers understand the needs of Grade 2, 5, and 8 students and provide information that schools use to set school-wide goals for improvement.

The board also uses literacy assessment results to help teachers learn about effective instruction, assessment, and support for students who are struggling as readers. Last year’s results tell us that we need to focus our professional development efforts on the following priorities:

- Helping students learn to read accurately and fluently in the early elementary grades (Primary to 3).
- Strengthening reading comprehension (i.e., students’ ability to understand and learn from what they read) in all elementary *and* junior high grades (Primary to 9) with a particular focus on reading non-fiction materials in Grades 4 to 9.

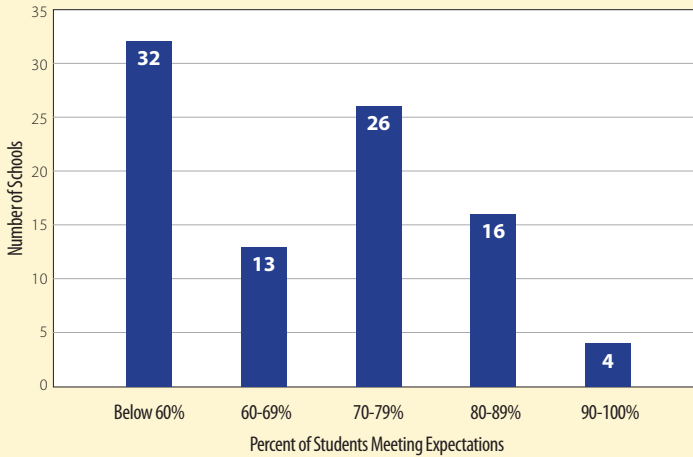
We will focus on these priorities as well as professional development strategies that allow teachers to target the specific needs of students in their classrooms. To help all schools continue to strengthen literacy instruction across the curriculum, the board is investing in the following initiatives this year:

1. Literacy coaches work in all schools to provide support to individual teachers in their classrooms and to teams of teachers working together in professional learning communities.
2. Thirty-five Reading Recovery teachers are being trained to provide support to Grade 1 students.

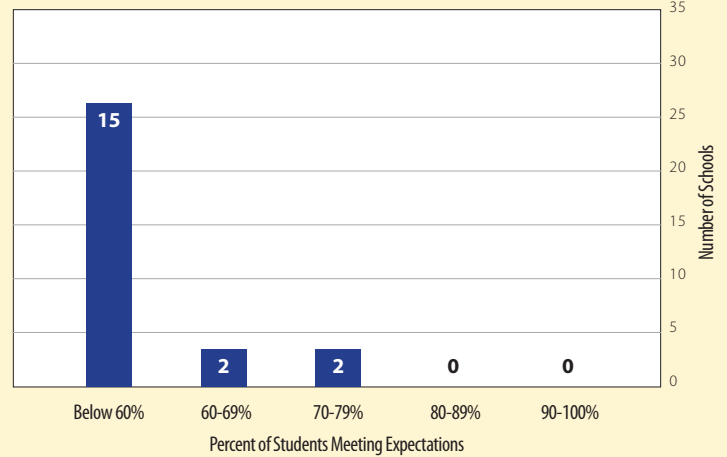
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What Percentage of Students are Meeting Expectations for Reading in HRSB Schools?

Grade 2 Reading—English Program
N = 91



Grade 2 Reading—French Immersion Program
N = 19



All of our elementary schools participated in the board's Grade 2 reading assessment, which tells us if students are learning to read accurately (i.e., they are able to read words correctly) and fluently (i.e., they can make their reading sound like talking—with expression and meaningful phrases).

In the six years since the board first assessed student achievement in Grade 2 reading, the number of students meeting expectations for accuracy and fluency has increased steadily. And yet, some large differences remain among schools.

During the 2008-2009 school year, 20 schools had more than 80% of Grade 2 students achieving at or above expectations. In 32 schools, however, fewer than 60% of our students met expectations. Now each school has developed a plan to focus on improvement.

Community members, staff, and students came together in 2008 to set expectations for this assessment. The target set for the HRSB was that 77% of Grade 2 students would meet expectations. Currently, we have 25 schools who have met or exceeded this target.

All of our elementary schools that offer an early French Immersion program also participated in the HRSB's reading assessment last year. Students completed the assessment entirely in French.

In the three years since early French Immersion students first participated in the board's reading assessment, schools have made great strides in supporting early reading development.

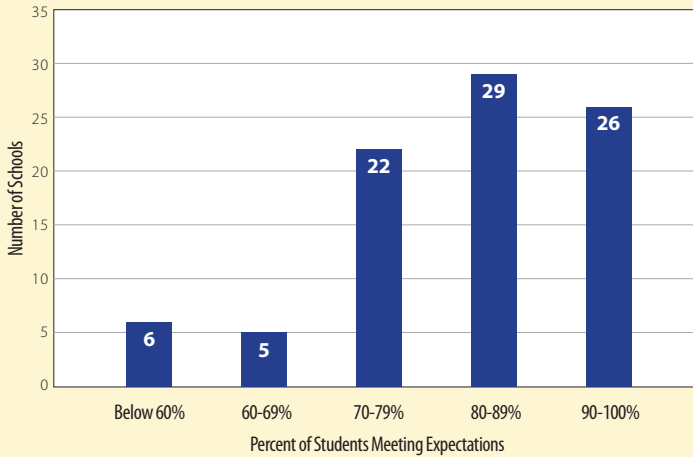
During the 2008-09 school year, in 15 schools, fewer than 60% of Grade 2 students enrolled in an early French immersion program met expectations. This sends a clear message that the board must continue to target reading development in early elementary French Immersion classrooms.

Knowing how each school is doing is the first important step in making sure resources and support reach the schools—and the students—that need them the most.



What Percentage of Students are Meeting Expectations for Reading in HRSB Schools?

Grade 5 Reading
N = 88



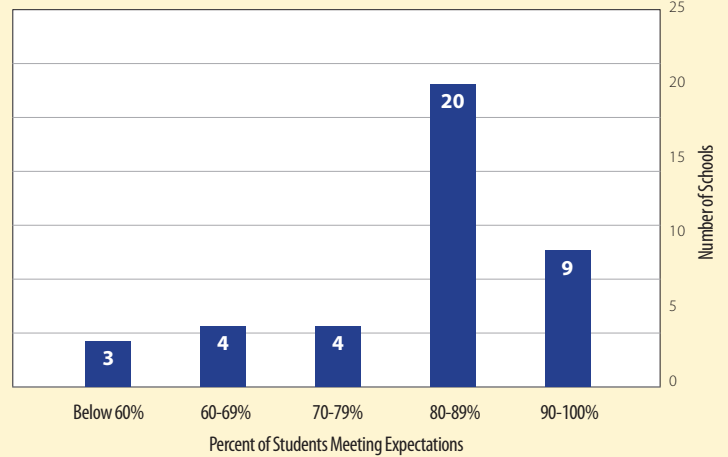
All elementary schools participated in the board's Grade 5 reading assessment for the first time in the 2008-2009 school year. Results from only 88 schools are reported here because three schools had fewer than six students participating in the assessment.*

Compared to the results for Grade 2 reading, the number of schools where the majority of students are meeting expectations in Grade 5 is much higher. This tells us that classroom strategies are working to help students grow as readers from Primary to Grade 5.

During the 2008-2009 school year, in 55 schools, more than 80% of students met or exceeded the expectations for reading. In six schools, fewer than 60% met expectations.

* To protect the privacy of individual students, schools with fewer than six students participating are not reported.

Grade 8 Reading
N = 40



Since 2006 when the board introduced a new assessment of Grade 8 reading, HRSB students have been achieving above the Canadian norm.

Last year in 29 of the board's 40 junior high schools, more than 80% of students met or exceeded expectations for reading. In three schools, fewer than 60% met expectations.

The success of the HRSB's students compared to other students in Canada is worth celebrating. However, junior high schools—with ongoing support from the school board—need to ensure that no students get left behind in their ability to read for learning and for life.



Last year in 29 of the board's 40 junior high schools, more than 80% of students met or exceeded expectations for reading.

3. Grade 1 to 9 teachers will take new information about effective literacy instruction and assessment to the classroom from summer learning workshops they took part in.
4. All schools have new student resources and teacher professional development materials to support literacy development.
5. New online materials will be created for teachers with a particular focus on effective instruction and student assessment in literacy.
6. Professional development opportunities will be provided for:
 - High school teachers in support of the provincial focus on improving literacy in all subjects;
 - Elementary and junior high resource teachers to help them support individual student needs with effective strategies for learning to read and write; and
 - Literacy coaches to help teachers respond to the specific needs of students in the schools where they work.

Building a Strong Foundation for Mathematics in the HRSB

Each fall schools receive detailed results from board assessments of student achievement in mathematics. These results help classroom teachers understand the needs of Grade 2, 5, and 8 students. They also provide information that schools use to set school-wide goals for improvement.

The board also uses math assessment results to help teachers learn the most current information about effective instruction, assessment, and support for students who are struggling in math. To help all schools strengthen math instruction, the board is investing in the following initiatives this year:

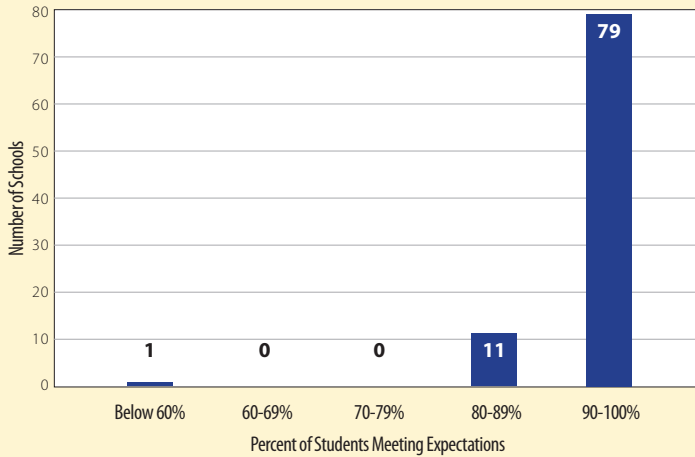
1. Math coaches are providing support to teachers in a number of elementary and junior high schools.
2. Math coaches are working in the board's 15 high schools to support effective instruction and assessment as well as supporting a focus on mathematical problem-solving with increasingly complex questions.
3. All schools will receive new student resources and teacher materials to support improved student achievement in math.



What Percentage of Students Are Meeting Expectations for Mathematics in HRSB Schools?

Grade 2 Math

$N = 91$



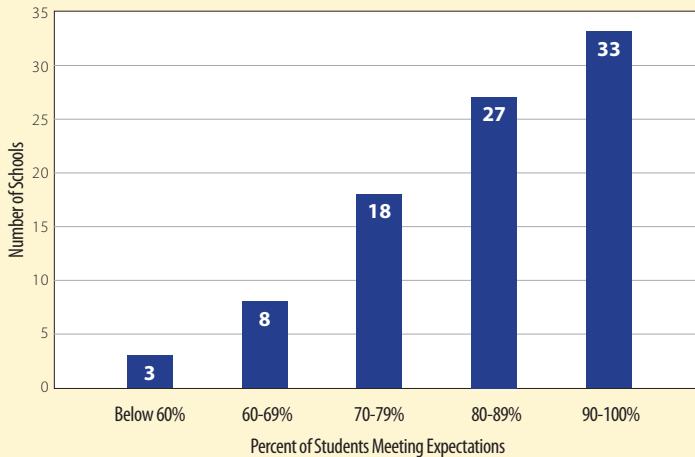
With very few exceptions, elementary schools in the HRSB are creating learning environments where students are mastering the early foundations of mathematics.

In 90 of our elementary schools, 80% or more of students met expectations on the Grade 2 mathematics assessment.

In the years ahead, we will focus on maintaining this level of achievement and ensuring that the good practices happening in so many of our schools reach all students.

Grade 5 Math

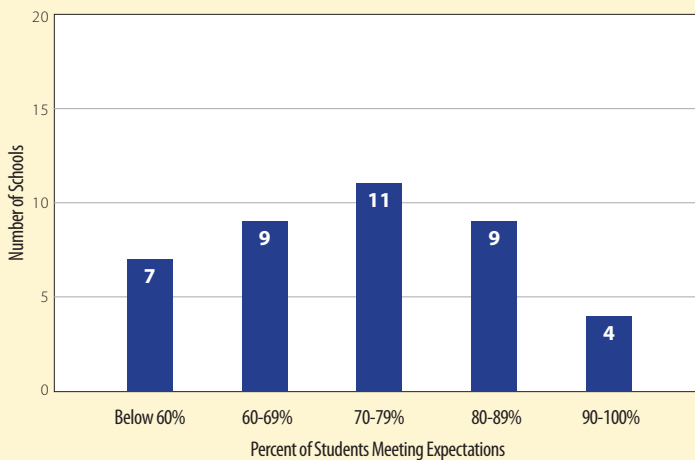
$N = 89$



In 60 of our elementary schools, more than 80% of students are meeting expectations. In three schools, fewer than 60% met expectations. The assessment tells us that measurement, operations with whole numbers (e.g., multiplication, division), problem-solving, and communication are challenging for many students and need to be a focus of school and board professional development in the years ahead.

Grade 8 Math

$N = 40$



A fairly high number of Grade 8 students did not meet expectations in mathematics last year.

This helps us understand that junior high students encounter greater challenges in learning the math curriculum.

During the 2008-2009 school year, in 13 schools, at least 80% of Grade 8 students met or exceeded expectations. In seven schools, fewer than 60% met expectations.

The assessment results tell us that Grade 8 students continue to struggle with measurement, operations with whole numbers (e.g., multiplication, division), problem-solving, and communication.

4. New online materials will be created for teachers with a particular focus on effective instruction and student assessment in math.
5. Summer learning workshops will be developed aimed at effective instruction and assessment of student learning in mathematics.
6. Board staff and school-based math coaches will provide professional development to teachers throughout the year with a focus on provincial math initiatives and the board's priority of improvement in mathematical problem-solving and communication.
7. Elementary and junior high resource teachers will receive professional development about number concepts and operations (i.e., addition, subtraction, multiplication, division) to support individual students.

What are Students, Parents, Guardians, and Teachers Saying about Schools in the HRSB?

Every school in the HRSB serves a unique community and welcomes a diversity of students with different learning experiences, strengths, and needs. In the past, we often assumed that a student's experiences outside of school would determine their success at school. Over 50 years of research has proven us wrong—schools can and do make a significant difference for all students.

We do need to keep a school's context in mind when we are setting and working to achieve goals for improvement. However, we also know that school context matters less and less when schools combine a focus on improved learning and student achievement with practices that support:

1. high expectations for student learning,
2. effective assessment and evaluation,
3. high levels of student engagement,
4. maximum time for learning,
5. safe and respectful school climates,
6. positive home-school relationships, and
7. strong instructional leadership.

Each year we ask students, teachers, and parents how our schools are doing in each of these seven areas through the board's *Getting to Great* surveys. In the 2008–2009 school year, 73% of Grade 4–12 students

(n=27,437) and just over 50% of teachers (n=2,346) along with 30% of parents (n=14,248) completed a survey. Here is what they told us about our schools during the 2008–2009 school year:

All Students Can Learn

More than 90% of students (Grades 4 to 12) feel that their teachers have high expectations for learning and expect them to do their best at school. Parents agree. As we explore data collected from teachers, however, we find that only 54% of teachers believe students can *always* be successful in their class. A deeper look at junior and senior high school student responses reflects a similar trend: more than four of every 10 Grade 7 to 12 student believes that teachers usually but not always expect them to do their best.

Assessment as Learning

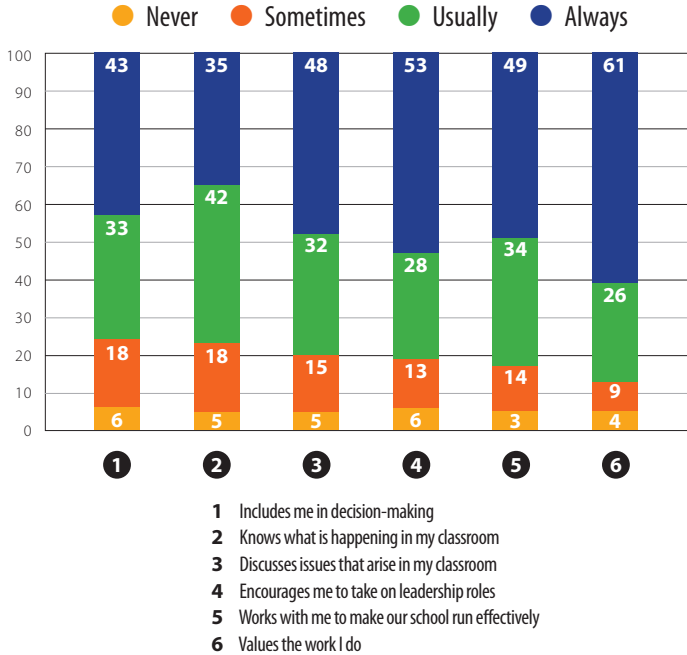
Effective student assessment has been a key policy and professional development priority in the board for many years. The Board's *Assessment, Evaluation and Communication of Student Learning* policy describes how assessment helps teachers and administrators make effective decisions about instruction and provides an effective vehicle for communicating with parents about their children's strengths and challenges in learning. For students, effective assessment enhances learning, motivation, and confidence and helps them develop skills and strategies as self-assessors who are responsible for their own learning.

The majority of students told us that they know how their schoolwork will be evaluated and know what they have done well on their work. So far, however, students are not experiencing assessment as a tool for learning. For example, between 50% (Grades 4–6) and 80% (Grades 10–12) of students told us that they don't always receive feedback on how they might do better or improve their work.

Leading Instructional Change

Close to 90% of teachers feel their principal has a clear vision that supports improved student achievement and sets high expectations for the quality of teaching at their school. Teachers' responses to other questions designed to capture their experiences of shared leadership for learning and improvement reveal similarly high results, but there are also some significant differences among the more than 2,200 teachers who completed a survey.

My School Administrator ...

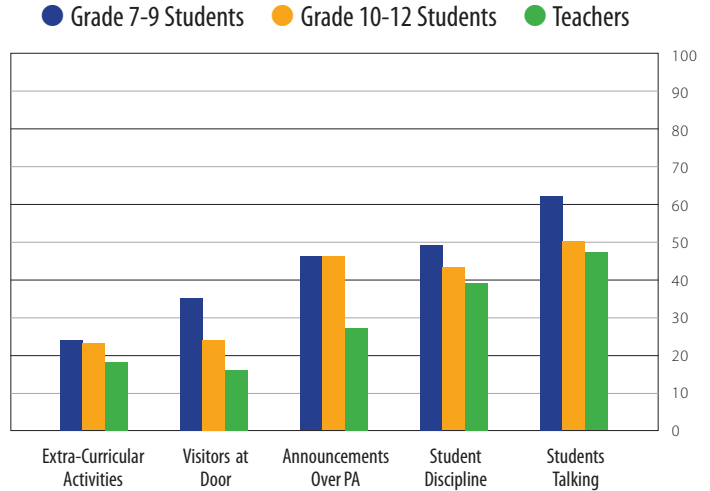


A Climate for Learning

Everyone, including teachers, support staff, students, parents, guardians, and school administrators, plays a role in creating positive school climates for learning. And while we heard that the majority of students, teachers, and parents/guardians feel that schools in the HRSB are safe and respectful places to learn, work, and visit most of the time, our goal must be to ensure that everyone feels our schools are safe and respectful *all* of the time.

Creating strong conditions for learning also calls for making the most of the time that students have to be engaged in their schoolwork. In the past, we often thought that learning was interrupted by activities outside the classroom (e.g., assemblies, extra-curricular activities). Results from last year’s teacher and student surveys tell us something quite different: interruptions from announcements over the PA are still quite common, but the most frequent interruptions to learning are the result of “students talking when they shouldn’t be” and other student discipline issues that arise during a class.

What Interrupts Learning Time Most in the Classroom?



Parents and Guardians as Partners in Learning

More than 95% of teachers try to ensure that parents and guardians feel welcome at their school, and close to 85% are in regular contact with parents outside of scheduled events such as parent-teacher interviews.

Feedback from parents and guardians confirms that teachers’ efforts are having a positive impact: nine out of every 10 parents and guardians who completed a survey told us that they feel welcome at their child’s school and feel informed about how well their child is doing.

If there is one way to improve in this area it would be to find ways to maintain the strength of these relationships in high schools: over 90% of parents and guardians told us that they speak with their child about their experiences at school either daily or weekly; however, once students reach high school, parents tend to talk less frequently with their child about school and are also less likely to say they have strong relationships with their child’s teachers.

Spotlight on Student Engagement

Improving student engagement has a long history as an effective strategy for enhancing school and learning climates, especially for students at risk of dropping out. Since the 1990s, researchers have focused on the importance of students’ sense of belonging and feelings of connectedness at school (social engagement) and their “psychological investment and effort in learning, understanding or mastering the knowledge, skills and crafts that academic work is intended to promote”²

(academic engagement). More recently, new research in psychology and the learning sciences (studies of how people learn) has established important connections between students' experiences of engagement in learning and student achievement.

There is growing recognition that student engagement is a powerful lever for improving the quality of teaching and learning in schools.³ In response to this evidence, the HRSB developed a new set of questions for the *Getting to Great* survey allowing us, for the first time, to ask students about their experiences of engagement at school and in classrooms.

Do Students have a Strong Sense of Belonging at School?

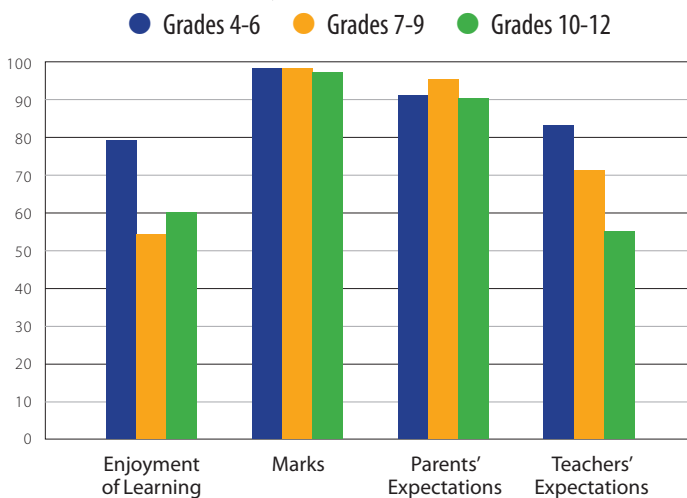
Fewer than 15% of students feel that others make them feel like they don't belong at school. Although this is a very positive result, it also points us to understanding that close to 3,000 students have experiences of not belonging at school, which has been shown to have a strong impact on whether a student persists or drops out as they advance through the grades.

Students' sense of belonging is also fostered by caring relationships with adults in schools. The majority of students in the HRSB feels that there is at least one adult at school that they can speak with if they need to. Most students also feel that their teachers care about and respect them, but these experiences drop quite dramatically as students get older. For example, 94% of Grade 4-6 students believe that teachers care about students compared to 65% in Grades 7-9 and 56% in Grades 10-12.

Are Students Engaged in Learning?

When we asked students to tell us what motivates them to try their best at school, almost all said "getting

What Motivates Students to Try Their Best at School?

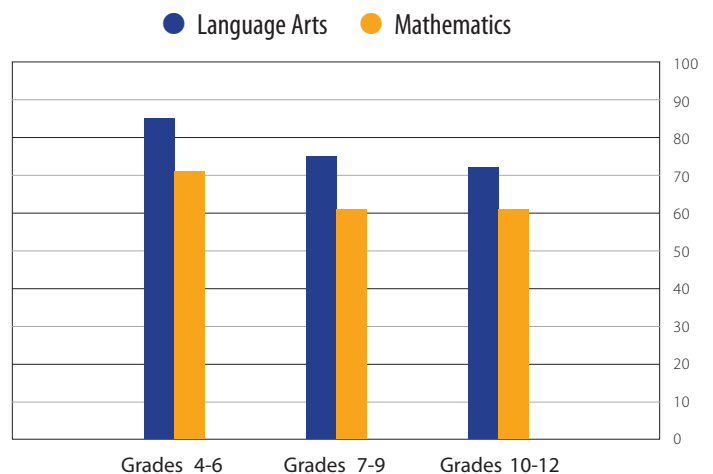


good marks." A large percentage of students also said they try their best because of parents' or guardians' expectations. Few students—especially in Grades 7 to 12—feel motivated because they are deeply engaged in (enjoy) learning.

When students feel intrinsically motivated because they enjoy and experience a positive challenge in learning, they are more likely to experience success. To be challenged to their full potential, students need to experience schoolwork that is "just right"—when learning activities are too easy, students tend to feel bored, and if they are too hard, students may often feel anxious or unsure about their ability to do well whether they are working independently or with a group.

The large majority (more than 70%) of students who completed a survey last year told us that their schoolwork is "just right" (i.e., it was neither too difficult nor too easy), although many (between 30% and 40%) junior and senior high school students also said that they find their work too hard or too easy, especially in mathematics.

Percentage of Students Who Find the Challenge of Their Work is "Just Right"



We also know that valuable learning happens when students are so engaged in their school work that time flies. In both language arts and mathematics fewer than 50% of students (Grades 4-12) regularly experience learning in this way.

² F.M. Newmann and Associates, *Authentic Achievement: Restructuring schools for intellectual quality*, Josey-Bass, 1992, p. 12.

³ D. Willms, S. Friesen, and P. Milton [National Report], Toronto: Canadian Education Association, May 2009; National Research Council – Institute of Medicine, *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*, Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2003.

In my annual report last year I noted that, “As a student-focused school system, we must also listen closely to what students tell us about their learning experiences. We must reflect on this input to see what it tells us about our schools and our school system. Student voices, especially in the stories of those who are struggling to succeed, offer powerful insights into how we might transform the structure, programs and culture of schools to close the gap between the students who achieve and those who do not.”⁴

Most students in the HRSB have a strong sense of connection to school. We also know that most students experience schools as caring, safe, and respectful places to learn. Like many school boards across Canada, our challenge lies in understanding the potential of different instructional strategies to deeply engage students in their learning.

There is a popular saying in education that “what gets measured, matters.” I have always agreed with the sentiment of this saying and believe that we have developed a strong framework for measuring what we know will make the most difference for student learning and achievement in the HRSB. At the end of the day, however, I also know that data on its own only tells part of our story, and is only meaningful when it matters and is used by individual teachers and professional learning communities to improve classroom instruction.

For everything we do at the system level, we know that what really matters is the quality of learning environments that we can create for students and teachers.

At the board level, we need to provide support to schools so that staff continue to focus on learning as their top priority. We also have a great deal to learn about the best ways to help teachers gain knowledge of instructional practices that are most effective in today’s modern learning context. Much of our work in this area needs to focus on translating what we know about how people learn into new instructional practices, bridging students’ experiences of in- and out-of-school learning, exploring the potential of student engagement to transform teaching and learning, and strategies to create vibrant learning communities within and among our 137 schools.

As Superintendent, my role is not to support and profile a small number of exemplary schools but to create the conditions for all schools to become the best they can be for students and staff. To achieve this, the board’s central team and I need to have a clear sense of what staff who support students want and need to know, and an effective strategy for sharing research and practice-based knowledge. Most importantly, we need to find innovative ways to secure time for teachers to discuss, plan, and implement new ideas in classrooms, and collaborate to reflect on the strengths and challenges of these new ways of teaching and learning.

For too long, we have accepted that it is okay for only some students to do well. Today, we have to create the conditions for *all* students to thrive as learners and be there to provide support whenever a student stumbles. At the end of the day, I believe the purpose of the board’s vision for learning and planning for improvement is to get everyone thinking about their individual role in our collective ownership of education. To that end, I would like to leave all of you with some questions to reflect on over the school year:

1. What does improvement mean to you—in your class(es), at your school, for the board?
2. What are your professional goals for growth?
3. What change in instruction do you think will make the biggest difference for the students at your school?
4. What do you know about the lives and learning experiences of students in your classes and your school?
5. Are students in your classes and school engaged? How do you know?
6. What roles do you play in the improvement process? What roles would you like to play?
7. What questions haven’t you asked before about teaching, learning, and school improvement?
8. If you could tell the unique story of teaching and learning at your school, what would you say to your colleagues, parents, community members, and, most importantly, to students?

In closing, I want all staff to know how much I appreciate the work you do each day to make schools the best places they can be for our students. I am incredibly proud of all HRSB staff and know that we have the skills, ability, and commitment to achieve our vision for improved student achievement as a dynamic team that continues to get better and better at what we do every year. We are making a positive difference for students, and I know that all schools will continue to improve, surpassing what they have done as we go from good to great!

Warm regards,



Carole Olsen
Superintendent, Halifax Regional School Board

⁴ Halifax Regional School Board, *Good Schools to Great Schools. Superintendent’s Annual Report*, May 2008, p. 59. http://www.hrsb.ns.ca/files/Downloads/pdf/reports/annual-reports/Superintendent_Report_08_Long.pdf



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Halifax Regional
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Every School Will Improve.