

# TELL THEM FROM ME

*“I think that the teachers being kind really helped me with the transition to high school. They would make jokes about their own experiences in high school and make us feel more comfortable. I suggest keeping on track with this survey. It is really helping.”*

*“I like this idea for the survey as well because it gives everyone an opportunity to voice their opinions.”*

Student Voices

## By Peter Milovanovic

Tell Them From Me (TTFM) is an online student survey tool, developed by Dr. Douglas Willms and Patrick Flanagan at the University of New Brunswick. The tool is designed to measure the levels of student engagement in schools. Based on Willms’ research with the Program for International Student Assessment for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and supplemented by research into student wellness and effective schools, the survey offers a unique window into the perceptions and opinions of students.

I first became interested in TTFM after listening to a presentation by Doug Willms and Patrick Flanagan in June 2005. One of our staff beliefs about our school is that ‘we are a caring school that supports our students in an inviting and friendly environment’. I was intrigued to find out whether TTFM might be the tool to tell us whether this was true for our students, or just a happy myth.


The power of TTFM lies in the ability to survey groups of students over time and to compare information from our school

reports with similar schools across Canada and with students of similar backgrounds to our own.

The TTFM survey allows students to share their perceptions of school life in a safe and secure way. Students are selected to participate in one of three ways: whole school selection; random selection over time; and class selection over time. A detailed explanation of these three approaches may be found on the TTFM website at: <http://www.thelearningbar.com/>.

This school year we adopted a ‘whole class’ selection process. To date, we have surveyed 1013 of our 1400 students a marked improvement over the previous year.

The student survey asks fixed-response questions and open-ended questions about the student’s feelings and perceptions of life at school. Responses to the fixed-response questions are captured using a Likert scale. They are tabulated and reported back to the school within hours of completion. Here are two sample pages from the survey:

TELL them FROM me						Return Home
Please click the option that best describes how you feel.						
In the past <i>month</i> , how often have you:	Never or Hardly Ever	About Once a Week	About 2 or 3 Times a Week	About 4 or 5 Times a Week	Every Day or Almost Every Day	
 Played sports WITH a coach or instructor AT SCHOOL, other than in a gym class? (e.g., school teams, swimming lessons)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Taken part in art, drama, or music groups; school clubs such as science, math, or chess club, or a school committee, such as student council or the yearbook committee?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

The TTFM survey questions are research based and have been validated by Doug Willms and his colleagues. The school results are valid, reliable and comparable with the responses of students in other participating schools across Canada. A detailed explanation of the structure of the survey and its research underpinnings can be found at <http://www.thelearningbar.com/>.

TTFM asks one standard open-ended question for all students that participate: *“Please tell us about some of the things you really like about your school, or things that would make it even better.”* As well, schools can ask one or two school-developed questions to further explore areas of interest or concern. Our school and Board’s focus on successful transition to high school led us to generate an open-ended question focussed on students’ transition experiences.

Responses to these open-ended questions are sent to the principal at the end of each month, randomly sorted to maintain confidentiality. While not all students respond, and while some students respond in ways that may be construed as inappropriate, there is useful information to be gleaned from all student answers. For example, we quickly uncovered a high level of student dissatisfaction with the food and service quality in our cafeteria. This input, when added to concerns that we had already discussed with the provider, led to changes in both food choices and servery personnel.

TTFM focuses on three broad measures: student engagement, wellness and school climate. There are a number of factors associated with each measure. The graphic below shows the composite measures.



### Composite Measures

District: ON York RDSB School: Langstaff Secondary School

Student Engagement	Student Wellness	School Climate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of Belonging</li> <li>• Value School Outcomes</li> <li>• Aspirations</li> <li>• Truancy Rate</li> <li>• Participation - Sports</li> <li>• Participation - Clubs</li> <li>• Time on Homework</li> <li>• Time on Leisure Reading</li> <li>• Time on TV, computers, and video games</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self Esteem</li> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• Anxiety Problems</li> <li>• Bullying</li> <li>• Smoking</li> <li>• Time on Physical Activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Effective Learning Time</li> <li>• Teacher-Student Relations</li> <li>• Student Advocacy</li> <li>• Classroom Discipline</li> <li>• Expectations for Success</li> </ul>

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Data from the survey are collated automatically and reports are displayed graphically. Reports may be configured to display information in multiple formats including whole school, gender, grade and a variable selected by the school, or district. Results can be compared with other schools and with data from a “replica school” that is comprised of students similar to our school. In addition, the results can be displayed with bar graphs and as trend lines. The former show the cumulative results to date, while the latter show changes in the responses of the various sub-groups each month.

An area of particular interest for our school was being able to examine the experiences of our students who are at-risk of not graduating. Students in this grouping were selected using academic achievement data and the provincial test results from the Educational Quality Assessment Office. In total, 228 students were identified using these criteria. We were most interested to see if there were significant differences in the levels of engagement, wellness and feelings about school climate between the identified at-risk population and the rest of the school population. The chart below summarizes the

responses of the students who have participated in the survey to date.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>At-Risk</b>	<b>Not At-Risk</b>	<b>All Schools Average</b>
% Positive Sense of Belonging	61	73	74
% Value School Outcomes	81	81	71
% Aspirations Finishing High School	89	95	92.5
% Going to College or University	81	92	68
% Truancy (Absences/Lateness)	56	41	35
% Participation – Sports	32	27	34
% Participation – Clubs	35	50	34
Hours per Day on Homework	1.4	1.7	1.0
Hours per Day on Leisure Reading	0.9	0.9	0.9
Hours per Day on Watching TV	1.6	1.6	1.9
Hours per Day on Computers or Video Games	2.0	2.0	2.2

What is striking when comparing the two groups according to at-risk status is how similar they are in some areas and how markedly different they are in others. Student engagement, for example, shows virtually identical results on four of the measures – valuing school outcomes, hours per day on reading, television, computers or video games. Where the two populations diverge, however, the differences are striking. The feelings of a sense of belonging are quite different. Of the 200 at-risk students who have completed the survey to date, 80 (40%) of these students feel less connected to the school. This compares with 162 (27%) of the 600 students who were not identified as at-risk.

Although the two groups appear to value school outcomes at virtually the same level, the at-risk group reported much higher absenteeism including being late for classes, skipping classes, or missing school without a valid reason. This pattern is consistent with our school attendance records. The students in the at-risk category appear to value school and see it as a ticket to post-secondary education, as evidenced by the 81% who aspire to go to college or university.

The health and wellness measures in the survey are closely connected to the levels of student engagement. The chart shows the six indicators and the results for the at-risk and not-at-risk populations.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>At-Risk</b>	<b>Not At-Risk</b>	<b>All Schools Average</b>
% Self Esteem	69	79	79
% Depression (mild and moderate)	20.4	23.5	23.9
% Anxiety Problems (mild and moderate)	30.9	26.5	23.5
% Victims of Bullying	21	13.2	24
% Smoking	13	8	18
Hours per Day on Physical Activities	1.4	1.4	1.8

Student wellness data parallels and reinforces the differences between the two groups that seen in student engagement data. The results show lowered self esteem, and elevated levels of depression and anxiety in the at-risk population. The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine’s report *Engaging Schools: Fostering High School Students' Motivation to Learn*, (2004) states:

Students who come to school hungry, tired, chronically ill, depressed or preoccupied with family problems cannot engage fully in the academic curriculum.

As a school we’ve attempted to address some of the issues raised by these data in a number of ways. In addition to the work of our guidance counsellors, our Child and Youth Worker provides both individual and group counselling for students and has a created an after-school group for girls. We have retained

the services of a psychotherapist who is working to support and counsel some of our students with pressing mental health needs. We have also arranged additional counselling supports through our Board’s Attendance Services Department and we are in the process of seeking partnerships with other service providers.

Information from student responses to the open-ended questions last year told us that Grade 9 students couldn’t spend lunch time with friends they had known since elementary school. As a result, this year we created a common lunch period for all of our grade 9 students. This has helped us to create a safe environment for both groups and may have helped to lower the prevalence of bullying in our school.

The students’ perceptions of the school climate are nearly identical across both groups. Reporting is on a ten point scale. As the table below shows, the two groups do not differ substantially.

<b>Factor</b>	<b>At-Risk</b>	<b>Not At-Risk</b>	<b>All Schools Average</b>
Effective Learning Time	6.2	6.4	6.4
Teacher Student Relations	5.7	5.9	6.1
Student Advocacy	3.5	3.7	3.7
Classroom Discipline	5.9	6.0	6.0
Teacher Expectations for Success	7.0	7.3	7.5

TTFM is a focal point for talking about data and thinking about the impact of engagement, wellness and school climate on student learning and student success. As we have looked at the experiences of the at-risk population at the school, we realize that our students' aspirations are similar, but their experiences and feelings about school are markedly different.

The Ferguson report to the Ministry of Education, recommends that the education system "be more understanding, be more flexible, and be more proactive in reaching out to youth, families, and communities." (Ferguson, et al, 2005) Among others, the Report suggests: listening to what students say; including a broad offering of extra-curricular activities; providing sufficient and appropriate resources for assessment, counselling, and needed interventions; and encouraging a

culture in which youth feel they 'belong' within schools. The importance of TTFM as a tool to assist principals in working toward these goals is clear.

TTFM provides a rich data source for principals, teachers and parents to reveal more about how students experience life at school. It is a stimulus for discussions about our school practices and our policies and is now used routinely to inform many of the decisions that we are making to make a difference for our students and school. TTFM challenges us to think about how we organize our schools, the programs we offer and the ways that we teach to ensure that students feel they belong, are valued and respected in our school community.