MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: REPORT ON PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN A BROADER MEASURE OF SUCCESS

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MEASURING WHAT MATTERS
People for Education – working with experts from across Canada – is leading a multi-year project to broaden the Canadian definition of school success by expanding the indicators we use to measure schools’ progress in a number of vital areas.

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INTRODUCTION

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AROUND A BROADER MEASURE OF SUCCESS

People for Education has embarked on a project to broaden the definition of school success by expanding the indicators we use to measure progress. Working with a wide range of partners, we are developing a set of measurements that will allow educators and the public to understand whether we are providing students with the skills and competencies they need to prosper, and whether our publicly funded schools have goals that are aligned with the goals articulated by post-secondary institutions, employers and society.

WHAT IS MEASURED, MATTERS

The Canadian public is hungry for ways to understand the strength and effectiveness of our public institutions. We set goals for, measure, and report about such issues as wait times for hip replacement surgery, the capacity of public transit systems to accommodate riders, employment rates for university graduates, and recidivism among convicted criminals, the magnitude of Canada’s gross domestic product, and Canada’s balance of international payments.

In the education domain, policy-makers, educators, employers, parents, and the public want to know if our schools are successful; they want evidence of what is working well and where the education system is falling short. Over the last 20 years, the success of public schools has been measured in two important areas — literacy and numeracy. Ontario also tracks how many credits secondary school students accumulate and the rate at which Ontario students graduate.

But other important outcomes in the domains of health and well-being, social-emotional skills, creativity and innovation, citizenship, and the quality of the learning environment itself, are not typically assessed with the same regularity, fidelity or rigour. People for Education believes that these outcomes deserve the same attention that is devoted to literacy and numeracy and has set an ambitious agenda for the development of authentic measures of these neglected dimensions of schooling.

These dimensions of learning overlap, interconnect, and are mutually reinforcing. Each is significant for students’ individual experience and knowledge, as well as for the public interest in ensuring graduates who are knowledgeable, healthy, creative, skilled and capable of undertaking their responsibilities of citizenship.

THE MEASURING WHAT MATTERS INITIATIVE

The project has two core components:

1. We have begun a broad public dialogue with diverse constituencies – educators and employers, parents and civic leaders – to inform our work to develop measurable outcomes in key areas. Using results from surveys, focus groups and online dialogues, and symposia, we will build consensus – both inside the education system and in the broader community – around critical outcomes for schooling, about
what would constitute evidence of student learning and about educational opportunities that support those outcomes.

2. Working with leading experts, and incorporating information from the public conversations, we will develop an educationally useful and publicly understandable set of performance standards and, ultimately, measures for schools that are feasible, valid, and reliable; the measures will be piloted in selected schools.

This is a complex research project, and at least part of its success relies on the development of connections and partnerships. We will connect with work that is already underway in schools – and shine a light on some of the innovative ways schools are building students’ broader capacities. We will work in partnership with leading researchers, and with educational leaders from Ontario and beyond to ensure that the new set of measures reflect the current state of knowledge in terms of education and measurement. And we will connect with leaders in science and technology, business, the arts, citizenship, and early and higher education to make sure that the measures we develop are important for students’ – and society’s – long term future.

Already we have built an unusually large partnership around the initiative. We are proud to have multi-year financial support from major charitable foundations (Atkinson, Webster, Counselling Foundations), from the three Ministries in the Government of Ontario: Education, Children and Youth Services and Health and from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. We are also proud to receive regular input and direction from an exceptional advisory committee and to have the process of developing measures directed by a secretariat which provides technical leadership and subject matter and measurement expertise in the development of the new set of measures.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN MEASURING WHAT MATTERS?

A core assumption of People for Education is that the school system, and the policies that shape it, are affected by what the public says and thinks about the work of schools. Public opinion and sometimes public pressure (politics, by another name) make a difference for students and the educators who work in schools. Change in the education system rarely comes because of a direct order from above; instead, conversations in staffrooms, around dinner tables and on playgrounds slowly shape expectations, and over time, practices and decisions about priorities, resources and time in the education system. The process for Measuring What Matters is based on the core belief that it is vitally important to engage the public at every stage in the process – this is an essential part of ensuring the measures we develop are meaningful.

We identified at least two key publics which must be engaged – first, the broader general public that includes citizens, workers and employers, parents and older generations – to ensure the measures are publicly understandable, and respond to core concerns about students’ schooling. Second, the larger education sector must be engaged to ensure the measures are educationally useful and relevant to teaching and learning in schools. Ontario has a very large education system, with two million students, 5000 schools, 72 school boards (English public and Catholic, French Catholic and public), and the equivalent of 127,000 full-time educators.
Any measures of school success must be both relevant and understandable to the general public, as well as educators. It is all very well for People for Education to say we are measuring what matters – what does everybody else think? Are we using the same language to talk about similar things? These questions are too important to leave to experts or even educators alone – a dialogue is essential, right from the beginning.

To the extent a broader set of measures of school success has the potential to change the school system, we want to ensure both the measures and the process by which results are shared are educationally useful (support teaching and learning) as well as transparent.

To communicate the many important ways in which public education contributes to children's learning and development, and to society at large, it will be vital that people are able to clearly articulate the ways in which what happens in school – the curriculum students learn and their experiences there – shapes our country.

SUMMARY OF METHODOLOGY

Given the goals of our public engagement process, we knew from the beginning that we needed to use multiple approaches to reach a broad cross-section of the different publics who have an interest in the work we are doing. Accordingly, we used a variety of different strategies to conduct a range of conversations – both at the provincial level, through surveying, online dialogues, webinars and meetings with the membership and leadership of provincial organizations – and in local communities through focus groups with students, educators and parents in particular schools, and meetings with organizations that serve particular groups, for example, marginalized youth, who might be less likely to be reached through a universal strategy.

The purpose of the initial engagement process was to learn about the views of diverse publics about 'what matters', and to get a sense of different groups' perception of the benefits, pitfalls and omissions in undertaking a project like this. This information will feed into work on the 'technical' side of the project, informing the selection and development of standards and measures. At the same time, in the tradition of policy-focused action research, we will use the process of engagement to start new conversations – and connect existing ones – about recognizing and supporting the broader purposes of schooling, and building a robust definition of school success.

Between January, 2014 and September 2014 we collected data and engaged members of different publics by various methods, including:

Bilingual online survey:

- We disseminated a province-wide, bilingual online survey, that was publicized both through the People for Education network and media coverage, including front-page coverage in the Toronto Star (Canada's most widely-read newspaper) and
CBC interviews with the potential to reach more than 2 million listeners/readers across Ontario. In total, we received 4002 responses, from people across Ontario (and a few beyond), who identified themselves as concerned members of the public, parents or students, elementary or secondary school teachers and principals, educational support staff and early childhood educators and others. Respondents provided both quantitative and qualitative information about the domains, and about their views on measurement. Responses to multiple choice questions were analyzed using SPSS, and open-ended responses were coded for themes and key messages.

Webinar series

• Just under 400 people participated in a webinar series, facilitated by leading experts, on measuring health (with Dr. Bruce Ferguson), citizenship (with Dr. Alan Sears), creativity (with Dr. Rena Upitis) and social-emotional skills (with Dr. Stuart Shanker).

Workshops / Facilitated Discussions with provincial organizations

• People for Education had the opportunity to conduct workshops or discussions with large groups convened by various provincial organizations, including the provincial council of the Ontario Student Trustees’ Association and the Ontario Principals’ Council, the Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, the Public Policy Forum, and the Canadian Teachers’ Federation.

• A plenary panel and consultation workshop was a central part of the 2013 People for Education conference, giving us early feedback on the project and a chance to further develop the framework for the overall consultation.

Focus groups in Ontario schools and community organizations

• With support from the leadership of two Ontario school boards, we were able to conduct thirteen focus groups in five Ontario schools, in the near north and in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area. We had in-depth conversations with secondary and elementary school students, parents, and staff groups about how to define school success and what it means to measure. We held community-group facilitated focus groups with student participants in Success Beyond Limits, and with representatives of youth-serving community organizations through the United Way’s Community of Practice on Youth Educational Attainment. We also conducted the first in what we anticipate will be a series of focus groups with young entrepreneurs in Ryerson University’s Digital Media Zone.

Symposia and participation in education research settings

• Measuring What Matters was on the program at numerous educational research gatherings, allowing us to gather perspectives from across Ontario, Canada and even internationally. We presented work and heard from researchers at the Ontario Education Research Symposium, the BC Assessment Forum, the

Meetings with leadership of a range of provincial and national organizations we had face-to-face meetings with elected officials including the Premier of Ontario and the education critics from the Progressive Conservative and New Democratic Parties of Ontario. We also had meetings with staff in three Ontario ministries and with the Ontario Teachers’ Federation, the Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, the Ontario English Catholic Teachers’ Association, the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario, the Association des enseignantes et des enseignants franco-ontariens, the Association des directions et directions adjointes des écoles franco-ontariennes, the Canadian Education Association, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, the Waterloo Global Science Initiative, the Alberta Teachers’ Association and the Educational Policy Institute. Other meetings were held with Canada’s Public Policy Forum, the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, and the Samara Institute.

Online dialogues

- Through the People for Education website and online community, we have heard from a wide range of interested people from across Ontario.

In total, in addition to the 4000 people who answered our survey, over the last twelve months we have heard directly from over 1100 people, in key roles in the education system and from communities across the province, about how they see Measuring what Matters.

We are very grateful to these individuals for the time and insights they have shared with us, and to the school boards, principals, and organization that have facilitated some of these key conversations.

OVERALL REACTIONS: RESULTS FROM THE SURVEY

Currently, there are two main ways we learn about schools. For individual children and families, perhaps the most important information is the students’ report card, combined with parent teacher interviews and/or informal opportunities to talk to the teacher. Parents can also learn more about their schools through informal networks and/or through attending school council meetings or volunteering. However, the main information that is made publicly available about all schools – and the system as a whole – are the results of provincial tests in literacy and numeracy from Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Although the tests remain controversial in some quarters, they retain fairly wide public support and have become a central part of the province’s education strategy.

But is that information enough?
DO WE HAVE THE INFORMATION WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND SCHOOL SUCCESS?

About half of survey respondents (53%) said we could probably assume a school is doing a good job overall based on test scores in mathematics and language skills; 4% said we could “definitely” assume that schools are doing a good job. The remainder of respondents did not agree that high test scores necessarily meant schools were doing a good job overall, with 13% saying they would definitely not assume a school is doing well based on literacy and numeracy test scores.

While the majority of respondents appear to agree that test scores can provide useful information about schools, 68% also said that it is very important to have information not just about results, but about the learning environment in a school (e.g. What are facilities like? Do students have the learning resources they need? How do the teachers relate to students, to each other, to parents and the administration? Do children have rich opportunities to learn?) Only 7% of respondents think this information is somewhat or not at all important. Researchers agree with this perspective. They say that information about the learning environment is critical for understanding students’ and educators’ experiences, to investigate questions of equity, and to develop and monitor strategies to support student outcomes.8
Despite having said that you could probably tell if a school was successful by its literacy and numeracy scores, the vast majority of respondents (84%) also agreed that the general public definitely or probably does not understand how schools contribute to students’ success in areas like health, creativity, social-emotional skills and citizenship. These are all competencies that have been identified by government, business, foundations and others as essential for the long-term well-being of students and prosperity and strength of our society.⁹

Notably, across these three questions, there are high levels of agreement between those who identify themselves as educators¹⁰ and other respondents.
A large majority think information about quality learning environments is very important to understand how a school is doing. And vast majority don’t believe that the public understands how schools contribute to broader kinds of student success.

- Educators are slightly less likely to assume that a school is doing well overall, based on provincial test scores: 46% of educators reported they would probably or definitely not assume a school is doing well overall, as opposed to 41% of non-educators.

- 92% of educators and 94% of non-educators think it is important or very important to have information about quality learning environments. Non-educators are considerably more likely to report it is very important to have information about quality learning environments than educators: 78% of non-educators rated it very important, vs. 64% of educators.

- 85% of educators, and 84% of non-educators, believe that the general public either probably or definitely does not have a good understanding of how schools contribute to students’ success in areas like health, citizenship, creativity or social-emotional skills. Only 12% of teachers say the public definitely or probably understands schools’ contribution.

Overall these results show a significant percentage of people have real doubts about test scores in two subjects as a proxy for how well a school is doing. A large majority think information about quality learning environments is very important to understand how a school is doing. And vast majority don’t believe that the public understands how schools contribute to broader kinds of student success.

BROADER AREAS OF SCHOOL SUCCESS MATTER

Measuring What Matters identified a number of domains – based in an extensive literature review,11 each of which – according to a significant consensus among stakeholders and the research literature – is important for students’ school experiences and for their long-term success. The domains we have identified are social-emotional skills, literacy and numeracy, health, creativity and citizenship. Using the focus groups, workshops and survey data we have both asked open-ended questions – asking people to tell us what matters to them – and examined public perceptions of the domains which we identified from the literature. In our face-to-face conversations, and in open-ended survey responses, we clearly saw that most members of the public and most educators see the broader work of schools as very important.

In focus groups with students, parents and educators we asked what is important for students to learn at school, and without exception, participants of all backgrounds pointed to a broad range of learning that they see as being foundational for students’ long-term success and contribution to society. As one parent of a child just finishing grade 12 in Ontario’s near north commented,

What I want for my child from school is pretty much what I got: I want my child to graduate well-adjusted, healthy physically and emotionally, not to be afraid of challenges, to be motivated and ambitious and to choose a life and a career where their jobs help them make a difference in the world. I certainly look to their schools to support that.

Teachers in an upper-middle class K-8 school in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area quickly generated a list of school’s most important contributions,
saying “in terms of students’ futures – the things that matter most are problem-solving, empathy and kindness, being part of a community, knowing how to think in ways that are open-minded, flexible, and critical…” A group of elementary school students – all recent immigrants learning English, in a school facing high poverty and other challenges – carefully wrote a list of reasons that school matters for them on post-it notes, writing messages such as, “We like school because we get to make friends and learn new things each day… it is important because without education you cannot move up in life.” A student in grade 10 told us that “School is where you learn responsibility, learn about getting stuff done, learn where you are going and where you are at.” And a young entrepreneur in Ryerson University’s DMZ incubator program reflected,

It is like the school system gives you the lego pieces – math, literacy – but it doesn’t always teach you how to assemble things. To build stuff, you need more – the chance to try things, role models, guidance counselors, mentors, people who help you focus on the next step, people to inspire you with ‘this is how I’ve assembled the lego pieces’.

For the survey we worked with experts in the field to identify four examples of important learning outcomes (knowledge, skills, habits) for each domain, and asked survey participants to rate the importance of each. Respondents could indicate that they thought that the items in the domain were very important, important, somewhat important, or not at all important. They were also given the opportunity to indicate if they thought schools should not be responsible for a particular learning outcome.

Overall, what we found is that the public considers it to be very important that schools support students to achieve across a wide range of domains. Before looking at the domains in detail, a glance at the average rating of importance for each domain indicates that, on average, survey respondents considered the various possible outcomes in social-emotional skills, literacy and numeracy and creativity to be of roughly equal, and the highest levels of importance; health and citizenship, though slightly lower, were also rated as very important.12

The purpose of this exercise was not to eliminate or even prioritize the domains, but to get an overall sense of whether the domains we had identified were seen as important and meaningful for educators, parents, and members of the general public. Unequivocally, we have heard that they are very important. Moreover, we see that there is not a great difference between how important people consider literacy and numeracy – which we do measure and report on publicly – compared to other areas of schooling, about which the vast majority of our respondents agree we have very little public understanding.

SUPPORT FOR GOALS AND MEASUREMENT IN BROADER AREAS OF SCHOOL SUCCESS – AND EXCITEMENT ABOUT THE PROJECT

Our survey showed strong overall support for clear goals in broader areas, as well as overall support for measurement of progress towards these goals. High levels of support “in the numbers” were mirrored by strong endorsements in the comments.
Governments and the broader education community articulate big goals for schooling – create confident, informed, creative young people – but we don’t have explicit strategies to do this, and we certainly don’t measure our success (or not) in these ‘less tangible’ areas. It’s time we ‘count’ what we say we value. I will be following your project with great interest, and I have no doubt other western countries will be very interested in your progress.

Senior education policymaker, Australia

I think that in today’s management culture, what gets measured, gets done.

Trustee / Board staff and parent

I am thrilled to learn about this initiative. While I believe, wholeheartedly, that literacy and numeracy are of great importance, we have neglected the other areas that make a person and a society whole and full.

Secondary school teacher

Measuring is useful, to really know what your kid is doing in school. If the school isn’t doing well, it is not really good to be in that environment.

Grade 4 student, focus group

Interestingly, the highest level of support from the public was for establishing goals and measuring progress in the area of quality learning environments. This includes things like access to resources; the relationships between staff, and staff and students; students’ opportunities to access a range of learning and support; the state of the facilities, and parent and community involvement. 96% of respondents thought we should have goals for schools in these areas, and almost 90% of respondents – from all backgrounds – supported measurement of progress towards these goals. This is a clear message that a focus simply on student outcomes does not provide enough information about how our schools are doing.

The strong support for both measurement and goals in terms of quality learning environments may also indicate that most respondents are more comfortable with measurement where it is clear that the focus is not only on what a student knows and can do, but as importantly on the opportunities schools and systems provide to support learning.

When looking at participant responses for people who identified themselves as educators or non-educators some interesting similarities and differences
emerged around setting goals and measurement. Educators and non-educators both show quite similar - and high - levels of support for setting goals in all areas (educators are somewhat more hesitant about goals for creativity, with 82% of them supporting goals in that area, as opposed to 89% of non-educators). Looking at measurement, while large majorities of both groups expressed support for measuring progress towards the goals, there was a gap in the perspective of educators and non-educators; educators were somewhat less likely to support measurement. For example, educators were least likely to support measuring citizenship - 69%, compared to 77% of non-educators; and the gap was smallest in the area of social-emotional skills where 78% of educators support measurement compared to 82% of non-educators.

The majority of teachers support measurement in each of the areas, ranging from 81% support for measurement of progress in terms of quality learning environments to a low of 62% support for measuring in the domain of creativity. While principals’ overall support for measurement is very similar to the general pattern in most respects, 37% are opposed to measuring health. Parents tend to be slightly more positive than the group average about measurement.

To add specificity to the idea of measuring we provided three examples of current measurement initiatives, in the areas of health, creativity and citizenship and asked survey respondents to comment on whether these initiatives should be considered in Ontario.

PROCEED, WITH CAUTION

It is important to note that the enthusiasm we have experienced in discussions about this project has been tempered by questions and concerns about possible downsides. To some extent, this reflects the potential of the project to have an impact – our participants want to ensure that Measuring What Matters has carefully worked through the potential pitfalls or unintended consequences of the project. As one parent and educator wrote:

> While I indicated support for “measuring progress”, I do so with significant reservations. …Measurement tools drive priorities that direct resources (training, PD, school improvement planning, etc). There are risks …the language of “measurement” is part of the accountability trend in education that has, arguably, been a significant disservice to schools, students and communities who are constantly trying to calibrate practices to be in accord with centrally (Ministry, board) defined indicators.

The key areas for concern are an expanded definition of schools’ responsibility, adding to schools full workloads with “trendy new initiatives,” and concerns about how to measure.

DOES MEASURING WHAT MATTERS EXPAND SCHOOL’S RESPONSIBILITIES?

Probably the most common objection we heard about the project was a concern that having schools set explicit goals – and measure progress – in broader areas represents a major shift in responsibility. This view ranges along a continuum – at one end, we heard from people like this secondary school teacher and parent who said, “When you set goals like those you propose, the public decides that all
these areas are the sole responsibility of schools and they cannot be that. So I don’t believe that this is a good idea at all.”

Others welcomed the prospect of articulating and setting goals around some of the more challenging aspects of teachers’ work. For example, one teacher in a webinar described the advantage of measuring social emotional skills: “we are giving a name to the theoretical beast teachers face every day in the class that gets in the way of learning.” More broadly for many, the initiative represents a chance to recognize and name the work schools and teachers are already doing. Many people expressed the view of one parent that “good teachers already teach students the goals you are setting out in this survey.” Similarly, a parent and early childhood educator commented that, “The best schools are already doing a lot of these things, but … these best efforts are under-acknowledged.”

Most commonly, we heard from those who recognize that areas like social-emotional skills, health and citizenship are an area of overlapping responsibility, such as the parent in a focus group who said, “schools and teachers should be accountable, partly, for things that are the shared responsibility of schools.” In a focus group, a principal wrestled with the implications of being partly responsible for ‘the whole child’, saying “I don’t oppose measurement – it helps you know where you are going, know the gap you have to fill. But something like a happiness rate? School can’t control 70% of that!”

Incorporating areas such as social-emotional skills and health can work only if you include the parents in the conversation.
– Parent, survey

Beware of overload and add-ons

For many educators (and some members of the public), the concern about the project is the impact of broader expectations on workload, and on the already stretched resources of teachers and schools. As one researcher commented at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, “I worry about our expectations of what a school can achieve with a student: you may overwhelm capacity. Don’t overwhelm the front line.” We heard a lot about teachers “being stretched too thin” and concerned that “we can’t do everything well.” Similarly, we heard that the sheer number of current curriculum expectations is a barrier to integrating a broader focus in the school day, like the elementary teacher who says, “All great ideas but the curriculum is too dense to cover these things effectively.”

From a leadership perspective, too, a Principal’s honest assessment of the challenges was useful: “Maybe I have a bit of an EQAO hangover, but when I hear you say you want explicit goals, and to measure progress for these things, I think: how am I going to measure these things? How am I going to plan for them? And then, oh my god, I am going to be professionally responsible and judged for these things!”

A similar concern is that broader domains, in the words of an elementary teacher, “will simply become another add-on to the curriculum with no training and no
extra staffing, asking teachers to do more with less, again. If this is a true goal, we need people to implement it. In fact, I think we need an entire overhaul from the ground up.” Another elementary teacher expressed a similar view, “I agree with the initiatives that are being examined, but worry that all of these will be add-ons. Teachers and administrators can’t do more, but we can all re-focus and do things differently.” As these comments indicate, for some the project would be most useful if it provided a lens or impetus for a review and streamlining of an overloaded curriculum and set of expectations.

Many professionals – and some parents – also expressed different versions of initiative fatigue, or concern about a short-lived cycle of policy attention – “these great ideas will become more short-term initiatives that go out the door the moment the government changes hands and will not be sustained until mature”, in the words of one elementary teacher. Perhaps more cynically, in the words of a parent and elementary teacher, “Without a plan for how to support and fund real change, I fear that it will become yet another initiative that sounds great as a press release, parents will love for comparing schools, but it will have no real meaningful effect upon the daily lives of students.”

For others, the bigger concern was how to manage this type of project, along with any other initiatives that are being undertaken at a given time. Their past experience with overlapping initiatives leads to concerns that broader measures will not be implemented as planned, or well. In the words of one special education teacher:

Too many initiatives in a school leads to excessive paperwork and information overload for teachers. They often involve measurement modules that oversimplify or reduce the quality/intentions of the big ideas behind them. Volumes of material – written by specialists that cannot be implemented in tandem with the other competing initiatives in schools – mean that watered down versions of each initiative end up being delivered.

There were a handful of recommendations for addressing these concerns: quite a number of participants suggested incremental approaches – one broader focus at a time, for example, or measuring different ‘broader domains’ in different years. Others urged us to examine ways of working within existing policy documents, such as the School Effectiveness Framework, which is particularly closely aligned with the focus on quality learning environments – “why reinvent the wheel?”

Recognizing that schools can’t do it alone

This is important work... We need to show the public schools are more than EQAO test scores. But how can we do it without diluting the message and adding to an overwhelming list of initiatives?
-P/VP and Parent

School has become more in a kid’s life than when we started our careers. We know how important those things [the domains] are, but I don’t know if we can be all that to every kid. We need to understand the piece that school plays.”
-Principal, focus group

These comments underline the importance of a key aspect of Measuring What Matters – a central goal is to develop a set of measures that facilitate better
All of the items in this survey require adequate funding, training, and specialized knowledge and/or expertise. We need a system that combines multiple layers and areas of expertise in order to make these goals happen.

Secondary school teacher

connections between schools and the broader sector of community, health and social services for children and young people. As one secondary school teacher writes, “All of the items in this survey require adequate funding, training, and specialized knowledge and/or expertise. We need a system that combines multiple layers and areas of expertise in order to make these goals happen.”

We heard from community organizations and other youth services that they have a strong interest in working with schools. But they told us that it can be challenging, particularly if the school does not see the program as a fit with their own goals. One participant from a youth service organization noted, “We can’t even get a permit to run a bike clinic, not even from the school board. There isn’t an understanding others have something to contribute to healthy life of children.” A Public Health Nurse in the webinar commented, “buy-in is key: if you can’t even get a conversation started, or if teachers are not on board... it is pretty tough to get something going.”

In this light, the workshop participants at the United Way Community of Practice were very interested in a set of broader measures coming from schools. One explained that such measures could be helpful for both schools and the community organizations. They would help organizations to target their programs for needs identified by the school; another person talked about the possibility of a better reception for their work because the community groups would be able “to meet criteria schools care about.” A public health nurse wants to see schools mandated to work with public health, and talked about effective, active public health units that work “with their schools, they can assess the environment and implement programs, help with mental health and refer to appropriate outside agencies.”

From a school perspective stronger collaborations seem likely to lift some of the pressure to “do it all” off principals and teachers on the front lines.

At the Sudbury Health Unit, we already set goals with our schools and measure them... we are using a resiliency assessment, measuring developmental strengths/assets, and we have also done SHAPES [School Health Action, Planning and Evaluation System from the University of Waterloo.]

– Health Webinar participant

THE QUESTIONS OF MEASUREMENT

Central to this initiative is the question of measurement – and it was not an issue that sits easily with all of our participants. We heard, again and again, about the importance of taking into account different kinds of evidence – qualitative alongside quantitative, portfolios, storytelling and observations, surveys of parents, students and staff. We also heard forcefully from a minority of participants who are completely skeptical about the project of measurement at all.

Is it possible to measure?

For some, the concern was the subject matter. A parent in a focus group commented mildly, “Things like emotional learning, citizenship are hard to measure – harder than EQAO!” For some, these areas were actually impossible to measure, like a secondary teacher who writes, “You can’t “measure” immeasurables. These are all “subjective” areas and it is a waste time and money trying to “measure” things.” These comments were most likely to occur in the area of creativity, but other survey respondents were far from certain that it would
be possible to find valid – let alone useful – measures in several of the proposed domains.

*I am all for setting goals but I have a real problem with how we measure success. This is not a paper trail exercise and we won’t know if we’ve created successful citizens for twenty years! I laud the goals, I fear the implementation.*
– Elementary teacher, survey

What is the impact of measurement on students or school cultures?
For others, measurement was seen as something that was not good for children or for the school environment. Many participants were very concerned about the impact of measurement on students’ sense of self, and their motivations. They saw measuring, and particularly testing, especially large scale assessments, as something that worked against students’ love of learning and a supportive school culture. Many pointed out the sharpest impact of these processes falls on the schools and the students that are more likely to struggle.

Most students in the focus groups we held said they thought it was a good idea to measure the different domains, but we also heard from a few that the thought of measurement was a concern. One secondary student said, “When I hear about all this measuring, it can make me nervous – are you just going to add more weight to a sinking ship? Is it just something else to bring my grade down?”

Others were concerned about the impact of measurement on the morale of adults working in the school. In a different focus group, a secondary school teacher commented, “If you test everything, sometimes it seems more like you are second-guessing our skills, not seeing if we can improve. It is good to know where you are at – but there is also a fear of being judged.”

*My qualms about this survey relate to the fear that “measuring” will take the form of “standardized” or “high-stakes” assessments of some kind. This may not be what P4E has in mind, but governments don’t always listen. The last thing we need in Ontario is still more high-stakes testing.*
– Secondary school teacher, survey

*Measuring creativity or citizenship or social engagement can only serve to dehumanize the beautifully diverse ways in which children can engage with and explore these things. There are other ways to look at these things without measuring, giving ratings, or comparing schools against each other.*
– Parent and researcher, survey

Now what? So what?
Perhaps the most commonly cited concern of educators about Measuring What Matters was to ensure that the information collected would actually be useful. As one school board staff person reflected, “Measuring for the sake of measuring is wasteful...it is what we do with that information that is paramount. How will it help to change/ improve the system? How will it help parents /guardians / students to understand how successful the student is?” A few went further, expressing concern that if there was not a proper follow-up, a system of measures could actually be harmful to schools or students. One parent and member of the public explained, “Although I think it is great to talk about goals, without the resources to achieve them all you succeed in doing is reinforcing failure.”
Key elements to ensuring the educational usefulness of any measures include both support - in terms of resources, problem-solving and direction - from above, and buy-in in school communities at that ground level. Goal-setting, and being able to see progress “is key to the sustainability of movement in a school community” reflected one public health nurse. “Using assessment tools to gather data about a broader definition of effective schools is valuable but is only a first step,” commented one elementary teacher. For that teacher, there needs to be time to respond to the data and plan next steps that make sense for each classroom, each school, and each board.

What if a school wasn't doing so well on these measures? What would happen? Would it get help? Would it improve? Would people leave?
– Student, grade 8, focus group

The trouble with many systems of measurement is that you get a score, and that’s it. We already know the kids who aren’t going to succeed. The score doesn’t tell us how to get better. We need to know the ‘so what, now what’ – what changes?”
– Vice principal, focus group

If measuring means more standardized testing, no thanks. If it means occasional assessments with meaningful support for goal achievement - maybe.
– Parent, survey

How do you deal with huge differences in school contexts?
Many participants were concerned that schools – or students – that face greater challenges would be disadvantaged by additional kinds of measurements. There is concern that these new areas for measurement would merely provide more ways for “have” schools to demonstrate their success, and more ways for “have not” schools to be found wanting – either in terms of resources and opportunities, or in terms of student outcomes which are often shaped by factors beyond the control of the school. By contrast, a smaller number of participants felt that it was important that we establish ‘floors’ – in areas beyond literacy and numeracy – beyond which no school or student should be allowed to fall: a minimum level of fitness, for example, or a minimum number of opportunities for creativity at school. For more vulnerable groups, there is always a concern that ‘average scores’ could obscure ongoing situations of disadvantage. A related concern is that measures, particularly measures with a single scale, might fail to do justice to the achievement of students or schools overcoming major barriers. It can be demoralizing when major success, hard-earned, is not reflected in the external standard of value. For some, it might be appropriate to address this issue with measures that look at students’ growth, and development – ways of comparing a students’ progress relative to their own earlier work, or a schools’ progress relative to its own past performance.

For some, if there were meaningful measures of opportunities and resources linked to students’ outcomes across the domains, it might provide a useful lever to push for more equity. Obviously, not all schools are going to have the same mix of opportunities, but many respondents felt that having strong, research-based yardsticks for important aspects of school quality, may strengthen the case of schools trying to ensure their students have access to comparable opportunities. A number of participants also argued that data on who is accessing opportunities should be disaggregated, to allow analysis of potential patterns of inequality on the basis of race, gender, disability etc.
In different contexts, quite a number of people suggested that rather than work with relatively standard measures that were capable of comparison between schools, it would be better to establish categories within which schools could set goals and choose measures within the categories. This was seen by some as more likely to lead to goals and measures that were relevant to the community, and which enjoyed better support or buy-in from the school community. On the other hand, giving up the element of comparability would likely diminish system-level attention and improvement efforts, and make it harder to promote evidence-based exchange about “what works” between schools.

*My school of 1600 has a very diverse population of students (MID, substance abuse recovery, alternative suspension, 12 different alt ed programs, as well as youth who are homeless (and/or families are homeless) up to the very well off… Our goals need to be flexible and therefore, the measure of progress could not be a one size fits all. In my 30 years here, our apparently small gains with some clientele are a giant and wonderful leap of success to be celebrated, not denigrated by the media and board.*

- Secondary teacher, survey

*Schools across Ontario have huge gaps in resources and our poorest students often have access to the least amount of resources. We need to find a way to make schools/classrooms equitable for all.*

- Elementary school teacher, survey

*I have some hesitation with the health measurements of schools. I think those measurements should focus on the opportunities schools provide for healthy action (i.e. school lunches, physical activity within the school, etc.) in the context of the socioeconomic and broader community. Commenting on, for example, substance use and abuse within a school without discussing the socioeconomic profile of the community is irresponsible and perhaps misleading.*

- Student, survey

**Unintended but foreseeable use – ranking, competition, labelling (schools and students)**

Most participants saw it as useful for there to be transparency in terms of how schools are doing across a broad range of domains. Parents perceived the information as helpful, and many educators thought a spotlight on the fuller version of their work might lead to better recognition of its challenges. Certainly there were a small minority of participants who did not believe there was any role for making information about how schools are doing public – limiting information to individual student report cards – but by and large, there was support for more information being available publicly at the school level.

That said, many people worry that any kind of measure of school success will lead directly to a process of comparing and ultimately, ranking schools. We heard frequently that participants did not want to see an expanded version of a Fraser Institute ranking. Indeed, at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, the Fraser Institute expressed considerable interest in the work of Measuring What Matters.

More generally, there were concerns that public measures of success, would, in the words of a person identifying as a member of the public “create a further cycle of parents ‘school shopping’, instead of sending their children to the
neighbourhood school, feeding a cycle of poor performing schools and good performing schools.” A parent feared “measuring too many things will sometimes lead parents to search for the ‘perfect school’.”

It will be very important, in developing a system of measures, to be careful about how the data in the measures is reported, and to find ways of reporting data that – at the very least – work against the urge to name and shame.

“EQAO was never supposed to be about comparison - but there are comparisons, and teachers feel under the gun in terms of them. It is easy to paint a picture with these numbers – but it has got to be in perspective.”
- Member, teacher union executive

“Thought should be put into how information is shared publicly. Measuring so schools can improve is important. Measuring so schools can be compared or ranked doesn’t help society.”
- Parent and elementary teacher

More questions, going forward
In meeting room after classroom after meeting room, we heard participants who had been fully engaged in thinking through questions of what domains matter, what evidence should count for a broader definition of success, and weighing the pros and cons of measurement circle back to the key questions, “Who is doing the measuring? What are they measuring? And how?” We’ve seen that there is wide support in principle for measurement. Support in the real world will require careful work and broad engagement in finding answers to these questions.

Measures must be efficient
There was widespread concern about the workload implications of measuring progress in so many areas. In the slightly acerbic words of one elementary principal, “Be careful that you don’t recommend that schools spend so much time measuring things that not enough time is left for doing them!” It is also clear that the measures need to be integrated, from the beginning, with existing curricular and policy requirements. All the domains identified within Measuring What Matters are part of the curriculum. These connections need to be made even more explicit, and tied to specific points in the progress.

Not only must measures rely on data that is relatively easy to collect, they need to be clearly tied to educationally useful purposes. As a teacher in a focus group commented, “Measuring, creating data – tell me why, and I will do it.”

Measures must be valid, and reliable
The discussion about the dangers of comparison, as well as educators’ natural concern about using their scarce time well, underline the importance of having high quality measures. There were comments about the importance of rigour in the development of measures – and we are confident that as the process continues, there will be a greater emphasis on this critical area.
Beware of which measures you choose. These concepts are not easily quantifiable, and the selected measures need to be reliable, valid, and generalizable across diverse settings and populations. Consider what you're measuring carefully and if the outcomes are truly reflective of the thing you want to measure.
– Parent, survey

**Measures must take into account different sources of data**

We heard again and again about the importance of the set of measures drawing on multiple data sources. Many of our participants were particularly emphatic about ensuring that any measure must provide space for student input, and many others talked about the importance of hearing from families directly. Survey data as well as assessment data was considered highly relevant. A handful of participants commented approvingly on processes in other countries that involved periodic site visits and reports on how schools were doing; others worried about the development of ‘inspections’.

*In my day job, I work in human resources. And if there is one thing we know … it is that it isn’t fair to assess anyone’s ability on one measure. You need to do a couple of things to know what someone can do.*
– Parent and school council member, focus group

**Measures should reflect the integrated nature of the domains**

There is a back and forth relationship between specificity and integration in thinking about these measures. On the one hand, without specificity, the concepts quickly become overwhelming; and certainly incapable of valid, reliable measurement. But too much specificity – and failure to attend to the points of connection and integration between these demands – raises a red flag in the mind of many participants, who fear a quick shift into either inauthentic checkboxes, or micromanagement.

*… there is a danger in setting goals and measuring so many aspects of schooling that there will be a move toward micromanagement. Such all-consuming initiatives can reduce the ability for ingenuity and creativity by putting everything in tidy measured boxes. In the attempt to get the schools we need we may get schools that we don’t want.*
– Parent, secondary school teacher, student - survey

**WHAT BELONGS IN A BROADER MEASURE OF SCHOOL SUCCESS?**

Apart from the surveys, in focus groups and workshops, we explored how participants perceived the domains – in some cases, asking participants to tell us what specific content they would include in each; in other cases, generating ideas about ‘what matters’ first, and then asking whether it corresponded with the domains we had suggested. In the webinars and in the People for Education conference workshop, participants had the opportunity to spend roughly an hour talking about individual domains – how would they define them; what would be evidence of students, or schools’, progress and what were measurement issues in each domain.
LITERACY AND NUMERACY
While the focus of this project has been on broadening the ways in which we measure success, it must be underlined that most of the people we talked to - in all settings, including the survey - expressed the view that any definition of school success must include literacy and numeracy. From the survey, we see that:

- 77% of respondents think it is very important for schools to support students to write effectively for different purposes and an additional 21% say it is important.

- 73% think it is very important that students be able to apply math skills to solve problems; 24% say it is important.

- 76% of respondents considered schools supporting students to read a variety of texts for understanding to be very important; 21% said it was very important.

- 70% said it is very important for students to read for enjoyment, and another 24% said it is important.

In comments, many participants talked about the importance of “the basics”, including mastery of times tables and spelling. Others talked about the importance of a continuing focus on ensuring every child is successful in these key areas, and expressed concern that some students are still not achieving acceptable levels of writing or math. Some, like this school trustee and parent, worried about possible trade-offs, saying for example, “If we start measuring too many things, it will once again take away from the basics. I think the three “Rs” - Reading, Arithmetic and Writing are falling behind - we need to focus on these. When my daughters can’t do basic math it is scary to see.” A small minority of respondents appeared to think that “the basics” are a sufficient focus for schools, with comments like the secondary school teacher who says, “Teach our children to read, write and do math and the rest will follow.”
Far more frequently, however, we heard that literacy and numeracy, while very important, are not enough – even in traditionally academic terms. Apart from showing strong support for the other domains identified in the survey, participants also highlighted the importance of student’s academic learning in areas such as financial literacy; digital and technological literacy; STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) learning across the curriculum; and the importance of subjects such as international and heritage languages, history, science and geography.

There is a key message. Any measures that are developed must maintain the system’s capacity to assess students’ achievement in terms of valued academic knowledge and skills. While it is clear from our consultations that the public believes that schools have a vital role to play in fostering the “whole child,” it is also clear that schools will be blamed if children can’t read, write and do math – in a stronger way than they would be if students aren’t healthy or creative. But the evidence is overwhelming that there is not a trade-off between supporting students’ health, creativity and citizenship and supporting and their academic achievement. Indeed, the evidence suggests traditional measures of achievement will be enhanced, particularly for relatively disadvantaged students.

What we heard most often were comments that Measuring What Matters is opening a conversation which might allow a rebalancing of emphasis in the system, such as a teacher who commented, “I like the idea of a broader, more balanced and whole child approach to evaluating our students,” or an education professor who wrote, “it is so refreshing to see education cast as a broad endeavour.”

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Under Ontario law, the purposes of education are to support students’ “achievement and well-being.” Well-being is a key concept in the research on childhood and youth, as well as society at large but it is not consistently defined. It can be quite broad, and often includes not only physical, mental, social and emotional dimensions but also aspects of students’ spiritual development and aspects of their social and economic context. By any definition, physical and mental health is clearly a core aspect of well-being.

In the survey we asked about four aspects of health that are important for students’ well-being in a school environment. The aspects chosen on the survey are illustrative – they don’t exhaust the area of health. Survey participants considered each of these aspects “very important”:

- 67% said it is very important that schools support students to recognize signs of mental health or mental illness in themselves and others; 26% rated it important.
- 67% said it is very important that schools support students to know health consequences of choices regarding food, sex or drugs; 26% rated it important.
- 66% said it is important or very important that schools support students to develop habits of regular physical activity; 28% said it is important.
- 75% said it is very important that schools support students to achieve a sense of belonging at school; 21% said it is important.
Across the different groups involved in face-to-face meetings, there was consensus on the importance of a broad definition of health. A group at the Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition defined it as “physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.” Many respondents talked about health meaning “the whole child”. For some, the emphasis should be on a positive understanding of health, as opposed to the absence of disease. Many who participated emphasized the importance of looking beyond health outcomes to the school and even community environment that may or may not support students’ health.

There were a number of specific aspects of health that recurred frequently.

- Examining students’ physical fitness levels were identified as both important within the domain, with significant benefits for the whole child – from academic achievement to mental health and self-regulation. A range of participants were familiar with fitness measures that are in use now.

- There was considerable emphasis on how schools support healthy eating. Comments included ensuring that students have access to healthy food; educational opportunities around selecting and preparing healthy foods (this was described as a bundle of life skills including managing money); and opportunities to work in gardens growing food.

- Many respondents raised questions about sexuality as an aspect of health. Many people talked about the importance of learning about healthy relationships, and a significant number were particularly concerned about the importance of ensuring schools provide safety for LGBTQ youth. Specific supports for lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans or questioning students included programs such as Gay Straight Alliances, protection from bullying, and inclusive curriculum (this theme also arose under quality learning environments).
... participants in almost every session saw the area of health as one where it is particularly important that the school not only have support from families, but also strong, two-way relationships with other community organizations – recreation facilities, screening and promotion programs organized through public health units, child and youth programs, and accessible mental health services for children and families.

- **Mental health** continues to be perceived as an unmet need. Some aspects of mental health promotion overlap considerably with social emotional learning. Availability of programs that teach students about aspects of mental health, and knowledgeable staff with access to resources beyond the school were seen as critical.

- Many respondents also emphasized the importance of the **health of adults** in the school – as role models, as workers, as part of a comprehensive approach to health.

- Others questioned teachers’ capacity to assess student progress in areas like mental health. A webinar participant said, “I wouldn’t want to see schools measuring [students’ healthy development] unless they really, really knew what they were doing.”

- A related concern was that students who struggle in these areas may receive new and difficult labels if the focus of measurement was on students' mental health or development. Assessment in these areas raised new privacy concerns for some participants.

There was a clear consensus – in the webinar, at the conference and in focus groups – that health measures such as weighing students or calculating body mass index (BMI) were problematic, and should not be any part of any set of measures. Health measures that put too much emphasis on individual students’ actual health outcomes were also seen as a worry. One parent wrote in the survey “is my child with diabetes going to be compared to someone with no history of illness?”

**The importance of school-community connections**

Connections to the community – and other services – were seen as a vital aspect of how schools support students’ health. Participants told us that when the connections are weak or services are unavailable in the community, it places a strain on staff and makes it much harder for students to be successful in school. From the perspective of organizations in the community (i.e., public health, youth service organizations), a common concern was the extent to which schools welcomed them as partners in achieving shared goals.

The emphasis on the importance of community connection links to one of the major concerns participants articulated about setting goals and measuring success in the area of health. For many participants, of all the domains, students’ health is too large a responsibility to belong to schools alone. As one elementary school principal said, “health – both physical and social-emotional happens everywhere, not just at school.” Others expressed concern that schools and especially teachers will be overwhelmed if they are asked to be responsible for health alongside more conventional academic achievement.

In light of this concern, it is notable that only about 1% of survey respondents indicated that they considered the identified aspects of health “not schools’ responsibility.” However, participants in almost every session saw the area of health as one where it is particularly important that the school not only have support from families, but also strong, two-way relationships with other community organizations – recreation facilities, screening and promotion programs organized through public health units, child and youth programs,
and accessible mental health services for children and families. Some respondents talked about community hubs specifically, as a part of quality learning environments – but most focused on shared goals, students’ access to programming, and working relationships.

Measuring health using standard indicators such as BMI [body mass index] can have negative impacts on students. The measuring and monitoring piece will have to be planned very carefully with a “do no harm” approach.

- Public health dietician, survey

Teacher 1: We are part social worker now – it is getting overwhelming, there are so many external problems. It is not always our job to deal with all of this.
Teacher 2: They are all ‘our job’!
Teacher 1: Maybe it is part of the curriculum. But I don’t think health is part of my job. I am an English teacher. If I am teaching a suicide scene in Hamlet, then I will mention the kids’ hotline…
Teacher 3: Across the school, maybe it is our job. There are different types of teachers. We should have someone within the staff that reaches every child – even within English class.

- Focus group, secondary school teachers

We would likely all agree that all the areas you’ve presented are important to consider; however it may be difficult for schools as they currently exist to address issues such as health and mental health. Schools with immediate access to other professionals that could support these goals in all areas outside of student learning would be necessary to move this vision forward.

- Survey, Elementary teacher, parent

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS
There is an increasing recognition of the importance of students’ social-emotional development, for learning and for life – and an increasing recognition that social emotional skills can be effectively taught and learned in school.\footnote{16} For example, a recent survey of large employers by the Canadian Council of Chief Executives which found that ‘people skills and relationship skills’ were those most important for employers making hiring decisions.\footnote{17} Among our survey participants, schools’ support for social emotional skill development was identified as critical:

- 73% considered it very important that students be supported to develop self-awareness; 23% thought it important.
- 72% considered it very important that students be supported to be able to relate to the feelings of others; 23% said it was important
- 79% said that it is very important that schools support students to persist to achieve goals in the face of obstacles – and an additional 19% said it is important

Tough things can happen – failing a test, even a bankruptcy... We need to know, ‘this is not the worst thing that can happen.’ It’s about resilience, about ‘now I keep on going.’ School teaches us to be afraid of failure...

Recent high school graduate, entrepreneur, Ryerson DMZ program
• 74% said that it is very important that schools support students to **practice cooperation**; 23% said it is important.

**FIGURE 7**

*In terms of social-emotional skills, how important is it that schools support students to...*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill</th>
<th>Very Important</th>
<th>Important</th>
<th>Somewhat Important</th>
<th>Not Very Important</th>
<th>Not School’s Job</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Practice co-operation</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persist to achieve goals in face of obstacles</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be able to relate to the feelings of others</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop self-awareness</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For each of these key skills, almost three quarters of respondents considered it *very* important that schools support students. From the comments and discussions in the survey, workshops, and focus groups, this was also an area where it was not always clear what might or might not be included in the domain. For example, when we asked survey participants if there were ‘other areas’ they considered important, many respondents suggested things such as supporting students to deal with failure, supporting students to have healthy relationships and stronger interpersonal communications, and helping students think for themselves and develop their own values – all aspects that fit within a definition of social-emotional skills.

A recurring theme that was specifically mentioned was students’ (and sometimes staff’s) happiness as a goal for schools. From the comments, it was clear that discussions of happiness were seen as cross-cutting the different domains, with remarks such as “student happiness – ties in health, social-emotional learning, and quality learning environments”. Happiness was seen as linked to other desirable social-emotional states that can be supported by schools, such as motivation, perseverance, resilience and engagement. Others saw a focus on student happiness as a basis for self-knowledge and understanding others, suggesting that schools help students “understand how our happiness and well-being are interconnected with other people and the natural environment... Help students to explore how their choices contribute to, or detract from, well-being both individually and collectively.”

There were many comments about students developing the ability to work together and get along; some urged us to talk more about collaboration rather than “just” cooperating. One parent and school board staff member commented, “Teachers need to TEACH cooperation and working in teams / groups. Good group work doesn’t just happen, it takes skills.” A parent who wants to see a greater focus on collaboration urged more attention to school practices that
“cultivate supporting each other (for example: less competition and more supporting each other to do well),” and a number of participants talked about the importance of activities from musical performance to sports that help foster a sense of shared experience, goals and working together.

A critical theme in terms of the ways that schools support student social-emotional skills is the importance of strong relationships – both among students, and with the adults in the school. Several students from the Success Beyond Limits program talked about the importance of having, and being mentors as being very important to help create a network of supportive relationships, and another participant in that focus group talked about the importance of students knowing there was someone they could ask for help in the school. “It’s worrying when 9 out of 10 students in a school say the adults in a school want them to succeed, but only 5 out of 10 say they know an adult they would ask for help.”

**CREATIVITY**

While many respondents appeared to think measurement and creativity were not natural bedfellows, there was unequivocal support for the importance of creative opportunities and outcomes for students. Supporting students’ creativity was seen as being as important for schools as developing their skills in literacy and numeracy – and supporting their social emotional development. Across different workshops and focus groups, we heard a range of positive associations with creativity – it connects students to the joy of or passion for learning, helps prepare them for an unknown future, supports individualization in learning, creating space for different cultures within school, and supports high achievement in important areas like arts, science and mathematics. Overall, the survey results indicated strong support for outcomes associated with creativity:

- 79% of respondents said it is very important that students are supported to develop innovative solutions through critical thinking and experimentation; another 19% thought this support was important.

- 85% of respondents said it is very important that students are supported to communicate effectively (the single most-valued outcome we identified) – less than one percent of respondents said it was merely somewhat or not at all important.

- One specific aspect of creativity is artistic expression. 56% of respondents said it was very important, and another 33% said it is important that schools support students to experience culture through the arts.

- Participants want schools to help cultivate curiosity and imagination in students: 77% say this it is very important, and another 21% consider it important.
A highlight of the focus groups was a discussion with a class of grade 4 students who, when we asked them to define creativity, provided a stream of examples of how they had a chance to be creative so far this year – listing examples such as writing stories from their toys to themselves (“we had to imagine how they see things, hear their voices”), making up math problems or a song on their recorders, building a cup out of two or three materials in science, creating games on the playground, or writing letters to their teachers to persuade her how they should spend money they’d fundraised for a community project. The students even told us they were being creative, right then, to try to think of their own ideas about what made a good school.

Risk-taking was linked to experimentation (things might not work as planned!), allowing multiple right answers to coexist, and seen as a key to helping students find the resilience to “pivot” in the face of initial failure. For others, when schools support creativity they are fostering in students “the ability to change and deal with change.”

Creativity was also the place in our conversations where the theme of excellence was most likely to emerge. Creativity was clearly linked to allowing students to work on the things they care about, and that, in turn, was seen as the key to having students, in the words of one parent, “get to their best work.” There was extensive discussion in the webinar, and elsewhere, about student-directed ‘passion projects’ – where students are ‘assigned’ the job of creating their own assignment and doing it; or the ‘google 20% project’, where students are permitted to use up to one-fifth of their time to work on something of their own choosing, to pursue in depth. Other opportunities for sustained creative engagement – from hackathons to integrated, multi-credit courses or outdoor
leadership programs – were identified as places where students had the best opportunities for work that really stretched them.

Many people articulated the view that a key approach to determining whether schools are supporting creativity is whether schools are tackling barriers to creativity – from art assignments asking everyone to draw a dog, to concern about mandatory courses and prerequisites limiting course choices, or overly specific timetabling reinforcing silos, or too much focus on a limited number of subjects. For some, measurement itself – particularly where it is seen as high-stakes, such as when students are applying to post-secondary programs – is perceived as a possible barrier to students’ and teachers’ creativity in classrooms. There were many comments such as this one, from a teacher focus group, “We'd never measure creativity. It should never have a grade.” They reflected the perspective both that there is a risk that grading and judgment will limit students’ willingness to explore, and that creativity itself is relatively immeasurable. There was considerable skepticism – and outright opposition – to measuring students’ creative output. Some, but not all of the skeptics, thought measurement of creative opportunities held greater promise.

A good school is one that says 'yes' to youth and figures out how to make something happen after. It lets us learn that you can’t guarantee success. Instead of 'we've always done it this way’ – try, allow things, innovate.
Ryerson DMZ

I think that there should be specific reference to “the arts” in the areas noted above. Too often, we equate “creativity” within the arts domain, but that limits what the arts do, and also limits the notion of creativity in other subject areas.
Superintendent of Education, survey

Students should not just ‘experience culture through the arts’ but should be given and encouraged to take multiple opportunities to actually contribute to culture through dance, music, theatre, creative writing and other forms. Visual arts, industrial arts (the manufacture of useful objects) and Home Economics (the necessary skills such as cooking, cleaning and sewing, as well as perhaps knitting and other more domestic crafts) need to be re-instituted …
Parent and trustee candidate

CITIZENSHIP
A member of the United Way group of youth serving agencies explained that having a separate domain for citizenship is important, because it reflects that schools help students learn “what you do you as an individual reflects and impacts the broader collective.” Someone from the Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition said “citizenship is where macro meets micro.” Citizenship encompasses areas of academic learning – history, social studies, civics, or options like law – but almost all of our participants emphasized that citizenship learning involves much more than knowledge to encompass "skills, opportunities, attitudes and behaviour.” Students learn about citizenship in lessons and through the practices and routines they experience at school, and through the school’s relationship with the community and the opportunities it provides for students to be engaged in it.
Looking at the survey results, there was again, significant support for the different aspects of citizenship reflected in the learning outcomes, which spanned knowledge, practice and attitudes:

- A key aspect of citizenship education is that schools should support students to learn to work well with others, despite differences in worldview or even conflict. This dimension of citizenship had the broadest support, with 79% of participants saying it is very important, and another 18% saying it’s important.

- Another key capacity for citizenship supported by schools is the ability to evaluate evidence to make decisions; this skill is important not only in citizens’ lives not only as voters or activists but also as parents, patients, consumers and so forth. 68% of participants consider it very important that schools support this skill, and another 27% considered it important.

- Another key aspect of citizenship education is to understand how government works at different levels. 53% of respondents rate it as very important schools support students to learn this; another 36% thought it was important.

- Finally, citizenship education can support students to create change in their schools and communities. 54% of respondents think it is very important that schools support students developing this practice; another 34% rate it important.

There was considerable feedback in the focus groups, webinar and survey that the type of citizenship being embraced must include a focus on global communities, and also a focus on issues of environmental responsibility and stewardship. We heard numerous comments such as the exhortation from one retiree that students should “understand the rights and responsibilities of being a global citizen. All countries/nationalities/races/religions etc. share the same planet.” For some, learning about global citizenship is a matter of acquiring...
knowledge in different academic disciplines, from international languages to courses that focus on learning about different places in the world, and hands-on environmental learning opportunities, from outdoor classrooms to opportunities to spend time in nature outside the school grounds. Others see technology opening new doors for global connections through online relationships with students from all over the world.

Digital citizenship was another area of major concern for parents and educators. The world of technology has created many opportunities for new forms of interaction. Comments in this area ranged from a minimal view – wanting schools to teach civility and safety online to a more extensive view of using digital technologies as a platform for new forms of participation.

The concept of student voice was seen as very important in citizenship among many of our participants. As one grandparent wrote, “Student voice = active citizenship in school, city and world.” Speaking about some of the youth that were involved in an afterschool program, a member of the United Way Community of Practice on Youth Academic Achievement commented that students learn citizenship through “the individual feeling that they have some control over the decision of space/group they find themselves in.” Members of the Ontario Student Trustees Association talked about the importance of finding different ways to hear from students, throughout the education system, recognizing that not all students are equally comfortable speaking out.

Many participants see citizenship education as an opportunity to explicitly address issues of equity, anti-racism and human rights in schools. There were diverse suggestions about how this might be approached:

- Some emphasized the importance that school practices – including appropriate processes for conflict resolution and peace-building, and ensuring opportunities for participation in the life and leadership of the school - are distributed among all students, particularly those who are not likely to be “hand-picked by teachers”;

- For others there is an emphasis on curriculum – many, many people, for example, talked about the importance of ensuring that students have a chance to learn about First Nations, Métis and Inuit issues as part of their education;

- For some, there is an emphasis on the broader school culture – a focus on inclusion, and safety. This issue was raised both by those advocating for students with special education needs, and also more generally. For example, a teacher at an ‘inner-city’ school where we did focus groups commented proudly, ‘A part of citizenship has to how students are accepted – students who are bullied at other schools do ok here - they don’t pick up on the negativity.”

Perhaps the most common theme when it came to what is required for high quality citizenship education was related to opportunities for involvement in the community. One webinar participant described as schools with “more permeable walls … schools with lots of online and local-community interaction, less segregation of students' learning into ‘school knowledge’ that’s separated from lived problems and problem solving.”
Limits program talked about field trips to law firms and government offices as part of learning how decisions get made; an elementary teacher talked about the importance of community walks to identify issues and possible solutions, and many people wrote about the importance of students individual and class projects that connect them with organizations outside the school. A group at the People for Education Conference generated the following definition of citizenship education and practice in schools, saying a measure of citizenship needed to encompass “Engagement of the community [in the school]; contribution to the community; and an understanding of multiple communities.”

Right now we are making kids hyper-aware of injustice, but we aren’t providing them with the tools they need to do anything about it as adults.
– Parent and member of the public, survey

A student might need to learn how to disagree constructively, but perhaps the key is that schools must provide opportunities for all students to discuss and disagree about issues, to form relationships across difference and disagreement...
– Webinar participant

Students must not only acquire knowledge but must learn how to apply what they know in their lives. Global awareness, a sense of community and what is expected from them as contributors to the world in which we live is essential ...
Retired teacher, survey

It’s related to citizenship [community integration]. I feel that students need to have a sense of attachment to, security in a community. This includes not only a sense of personal security … but a sense that after graduation from school that there will be a place for them within society.
– Survey participant, secondary school teacher

QUALITY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

In addition to areas of student learning, we have heard from many people – experts, and those in communities – that it is vital to ensure that any exercise of measurement does not focus only on outcomes but that it provides real, meaningful information about the life of the school and the environment for learning. A teacher in a well-resourced urban school asked, “What are you evaluating? Students? Teachers? School? Community? The system?” While measurement needs to be useful at the level of the individual student or classroom, many of our participants are more comfortable with an accountability focus that is pointed at the larger system. Focussing on the conditions for learning rather than simply the outcomes can provide useful information to allow judgements about why something is or is not working to improve complex outcomes. It takes some of the emphasis off measuring students and puts a focus on schools and the system. Finally, learning environments themselves are also an outcome of work by staff and students. A group of high school students in a focus group, and a Principal at the Provincial Council meeting used the same phrase to define a quality learning environment: one “where it is fun and easy to learn.”

Students’ learning environments might include the resources that are available to support student learning – libraries, gymnasium, outdoor spaces, and technology.
We received numerous comments, for example, that echoed the Somali-speaking father in a low-income school who pointed at the blackboard in the classroom where we were meeting and said, “this is the same thing we use in Africa. At the school up the street, where the families have more money, they have Smart Boards.” A number of concerns were raised about the equity of access to school resources and there was a particular focus on technology as a place where gaps are easily visible. Teachers in a low-income school also talked about gaps in terms of other enrichment opportunities – such as school trips, participation in sports or playground enhancements. They were particularly concerned, however, by waiting lists for psychologists where they perceived students’ special education needs not being met.

One of the most important aspects of quality learning environments is the relationships between the people in the school. Another principal said she looked for evidence of a quality learning environment in “how people talk to each other: respectfully – ‘tone of the school’. Almost every group that included students talked about the importance of having teachers who treat you fairly, and are nice or positive. A student from Success Beyond Limits commented on the importance of “How teachers talk to you - when you're young, teachers shouldn’t give up on you.” A parent, reflecting back on her years as a student, comments, “Those teachers that attempted to foster a belief in my abilities left a great impact. It takes much more than a teacher but for the moments I had with them, they helped me push forward when I felt like I wasn’t good enough or I couldn’t master the work. It made a difference to how I behave as a citizen, in my job etc.”

Students and adults also emphasized the importance of relationships between students. One student in grade 8 talked about a school doing a good job “if kids aren’t alone and lonely at school.” Others talked about other signs of high quality learning environments including such things as students who stand up for a child who is being bullied, or students who are different from one another having opportunities in class to discuss contentious issues of importance. In the context of talking about collaboration and teamwork, many commented on how students support each other to achieve and exceed expectations through opportunities like teams and performances.

FIGURE 10

In your opinion, how important is it to have information about whether a school has a quality learning environment?
At least some participants talked about a quality learning environment as one that challenges students. As a participant at the People for Education Conference said, “You learn when you are out of your comfort zone (comfortably). That’s important for our ability to learn, to grow.” A group of teachers in an inner city school explained their success by saying, “we work as a team, and we strive for high expectations.”

Many, many people – particularly those responding to our survey – talked about issues of engaging parents as a particularly important part of understanding school success. A staff member at one school commented, “Kids pick up on the community in the school – they see parents show up to lay sod, and they see them doing it with teachers, coop students helping out. It builds a comfort level when everybody is contributing.” There were many comments about the importance of two-way communication, transparency, and mutual support.

There was a significant group of respondents who talked about what a quality learning environment means in terms of students with special education needs. They identified, in fact, specific goals or recommended specific measures around the extent to which students are included as a full part of the community, in all the domains of success; and the extent to which their special education needs are being met. Are the commitments in the Individual Education Plan being delivered? Is the IEP still relevant? We heard from an Educational assistant, for example, that:

I would like to see a greater focus on inclusion of students with special needs and tools for measuring success. Many times there isn’t a set curriculum for students who have developmental disabilities, nor any easily accessed teaching resources. Consequently, it is difficult to measure student achievement.

A parent and school council chair in a focus group talked about a school doing a good job at parent engagement, as well as meeting the child’s educational needs, when, as a parent of a child with special education needs, “you know your child is getting the help they need.” There were many suggestions, in this area specifically, that a measure of success should look to direct feedback from parents and students.

Alongside student input, a significant group of respondents recommended that we consider measures of staff satisfaction as part of an assessment of school quality. Their comments suggested that it would be important to capture information about such important aspects of school quality as teamwork and teacher efficacy. For example, a secondary school teacher and parent who described his work being in schools with relatively high needs recommended a staff satisfaction survey because, “If there is a great sense of collegiality, community and teamwork students benefit. If staff are in conflict, if there is unrest, or there are feelings of being unappreciated, students suffer.” Other teachers described surveys which could show whether they had access to support when they need it and the ability learn from each other. In the words of an elementary teacher, more broadly, “as with any sector, staff who feel supported, able to spend the bulk of their time on the most skilled and purposeful parts of their jobs, and empowered to define their career path and realize their goals will do their job more effectively – it affects the school environment.”

Finally, there were a significant number of survey respondents – although nobody in any face-to-face session – who felt that we should measure teacher...
performance directly. Effective teaching contributes to student outcomes, but there is little evidence that measuring teacher performance leads to improved teaching or better student outcomes. Without that evidence, and in light of the considerable opposition of most teachers to such a system, and the likely detrimental impact on morale, it is not one of the measures we are considering.

OTHER AREAS FOR GOALS OR MEASUREMENT?
There were a few areas that were consistently identified in comments that did not appear to clearly fall within the domains we had proposed. Trying to provide manageable information about the school system requires some hard choices: the number of domains is necessarily limited. Simply because a domain doesn’t fall within a particular definition of success does not mean that schools will not be addressing it, or that there are not ways to integrate this learning into other types of learning.

Life skills and financial literacy
There were a large number of participants – especially young people – who talked about the importance of financial literacy. Students were concerned to learn about taxes, and mortgages, and how make and balance budgets. Many comments in the survey, as well, identify this skill as one that needs to be more clearly articulated as an outcome of schooling.

Interestingly, many of the comments tied financial literacy to a broader set of life skills – how to manage not just money, but the basics of child development, and home economics with an emphasis on shopping for healthy food, and cooking. Interestingly, a course that seems to have fallen out of favour – home economics – appears to be more important today than it was decades ago when it was first implemented.

Preparation for the digital age
It is clear that technology is changing students’ lives and how they learn. Numerous participants felt this area required particular emphasis in terms of goals and measurements. Suggestions ranged from ensuring all students knew how to code, making sure students develop information literacy (ability to find, evaluate and manage information) and the ability to interact safely and respectfully online, to ensuring schools are providing comparable opportunities for development of technological know-how.

Your initiative is ‘measuring what matters’ and yet you’ve completely left out what matters so much that it’s almost ubiquitous - technology. Digital Literacy, understanding how technology works and its impacts on society. There is virtually no direction on this in schools. Technology still also occupies the top job prospects for the foreseeable future. What we REALLY need to measure is the digital literacy programs in schools and school boards.
– Parent, survey

Spirituality
A significant number of respondents suggested schools should or could be having goals in the area of spirituality. While this was more likely to be raised in the context of the Catholic school system, there were a considerable number of survey respondents who talked about the importance of students’ learning about spirituality outside of a particular faith tradition.
In focus groups in Catholic schools, this was inevitably brought up as a considerable strength of the school, and principals highlighted the Catholic Graduate Expectations as a framework they use to integrate spirituality with a “whole child” approach that includes aspects of health, social emotional skills and citizenship; others talked about the importance of having a relationship with a Parish in terms of school-community connections.

I think spiritual well-being has been overlooked, since it is often equated with religion. It is overlooked that many youth do not subscribe to any organized religion [but] they should have access to alternative views and definitions of spirituality to either complement other beliefs or challenge them altogether.

– Policy analyst, survey

Longer-term and post-secondary outcomes
Many participants talked about the challenge of measuring school success in the moment – and many called for measurements that followed students into post-secondary, into the job market, and into their futures as citizens. One retired teacher, for example, says “We should measure our success not on scores but on the students leaving the system and how they contribute to their own success and to improving the lives of others.”

Others talked about assessing school success in terms of students’ post-secondary pathways. While for some, the extent to which students go on to post-secondary is useful information about school quality, for others, a key issue of school quality is the extent to which schools help students make decisions about courses and options that will have an impact on their choices after they graduate. For example, a number of respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring students have a chance to learn about options of apprenticeship and trades.

Another area: career development. Too many students go onto post-secondary education and then graduate with diplomas and degrees that are not applicable to today’s workforce!

– Occasional teacher, survey

You need to be looking at where kids are in their twenties and thirties to know about success – it is who you are as a person.

– Staff member, focus group

SPECIFICITY AND INTERCONNECTION:
SUMMARIZING WHAT SHOULD BE IN A BROADER MEASURE OF SUCCESS
It is useful to have a degree of specificity in thinking about different domains – it makes it easier to identify key aspects of each, which is a necessary step to development of relevant and important measures. It makes the areas seem tangible, when talking about ‘the whole child’ or ‘wellbeing’ can sometimes feel a little bit overwhelming. It allows a focus on the parts of these complex domains to which schools make the greatest contribution. We believe each of these areas is independently important for children and youth, and merits clear focus.

But it is equally striking that there are huge overlaps and interconnection between the domains. We have already seen that with social-emotional learning and mental health, but there is overlap everywhere. One principal called quality learning environments, for example, “an umbrella domain – there are parts of
all the others in it.” Many participants talked about how initiatives to promote creativity, health or social-emotional learning boost academic performance. Talking to students in classrooms about citizenship, it is very clear that they see it in terms of broader social development or student health, talking about ensuring students belong, having empathy for others – but also academic research skills to learn about who to vote for and what the community needs. The emphasis on risk-taking that so often emerged in discussions of creativity has a complement in the emphasis on resilience that was such a big part of discussion of social emotional learning. The many parents who talked about the opportunity to be outdoors and in nature saw it as contributing to students’ health, to their emerging global and environmental citizenship, and as an essential measure of a quality learning environment. People identified an improved disciplinary climate as an outcome of stronger programs for citizenship and social emotional learning as well as a characteristic of quality learning environments.

There are many other examples, and we heard from a significant number of participants about the importance of avoiding 'silos' if we create goals or measures around new domains.
CONCLUSION

We had a fascinating time starting the process of public engagement around these issues. We have learned a great deal, and we are very grateful to the thousands of people who have shared their thoughts with us. We look forward to a continuing conversation – and we hope to continue getting hard questions, and challenging feedback to test and strengthen the shape of this project.

We have seen that there is a considerable interest in having publicly understandable, educationally useful information about key aspects of schooling, such as social emotional learning, creativity, health and citizenship. Alongside those specific areas of student learning, there is a very strong interest in developing measures that look at quality learning environments directly, not just at student outcomes. We have heard unequivocally that current measures do not provide information in all these areas.

We learned from our survey that, by and large, there are quite high levels of agreement in principle with the idea of setting goals for broader areas of school success, and measuring progress towards those goals. This support was clear both from those inside schools, and those in the larger public. It was particularly interesting that the highest levels of support were for measuring aspects of quality learning environments rather than any ‘topical domain’. We heard from many people that they were more interested in seeing the schools measured – in areas like relationships, resources and learning opportunities – than seeing more measurements of individual students.

Through the extensive feedback we received about the domains, we have come to see even more clearly that there are major interconnections between all of them. These areas of overlap are useful in terms of helping build a group of measures that work as a set, and – recognizing the diversity of students in our schools – to offer different pathways to rich experiences and learning.

We have also received stern warnings of possible dangers – adding to teacher overload, feeding an unhealthy process of comparing schools, building expectations without resources. We got many recommendations about ways of proceeding through the challenging waters – look at growth, progress and change over time; see how measures can be used to leverage stronger partnerships; maintain a focus on equity and the most vulnerable students.

We have been left with strong support for the project, and a new set of questions for the next round.
REFERENCES

Endnotes


7. All figures in this paper are rounded to the nearest whole number. From time to time, numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

8. See Bascia

9. See Ferguson, Sears, Shanker, Upitis

10. Educators are defined, here, as those who indicated that they were an elementary or secondary teacher, vice principal or principal; a member of board staff or a school trustee; a Director of Education; an educational support worker such as a school social worker, child and youth worker, or school psychologist; an early childhood educator or an educational assistant.


12. For the purposes of this analysis, the roughly 1% of responses which suggested different outcomes were not schools’ responsibility were excluded.


Shanker paper

People for Education – working with experts from across Canada – is leading a multi-year project to broaden the Canadian definition of school success by expanding the indicators we use to measure schools’ progress in a number of vital areas.

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