

The Better Schools Report

Research to Practice Labs

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The Better Schools Report 2026/2027

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Abstract

The Better Schools Report is a review of research evidence relevant to leadership and governance in independent schools. This first edition synthesizes peer-reviewed scholarship, government data, and policy research from Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom across four domains: faculty retention, family experience, graduate outcomes, and the classroom adoption of generative artificial intelligence. It is written from inside a school, by a practitioner-researcher, for heads of school, senior administrators, and governing boards.

The report's central argument is that schools study their students closely but rarely study whether what they themselves offer works. Several findings illustrate the cost of that gap. Canadian longitudinal evidence following a national cohort from ages 15 to 23 finds the raw academic advantage of private-school students is overwhelmingly explained by the socioeconomic characteristics of the students those schools enrol, with little measurable school effect; a British Columbia study of post-secondary outcomes finds that variation within the independent sector is wider than the gap between independent and public schooling. American federal data show independent-school teachers leaving the profession at higher rates than their public-school counterparts, while exit interviews — the sector's standard instrument for understanding departures — prove an unreliable source of candour, particularly in close-knit school networks where reputation travels quickly. On generative AI, the report finds widespread concern but almost no evidence base: two-thirds of teachers report their school has no formal policy on student use, and no rigorous research yet establishes what effective practice looks like. Together these findings point to a common conclusion — the meaningful variation in school quality sits at the level of the individual school, and it is not visible from destination lists, enrolment growth, or satisfaction surveys alone. The report makes the case for systematic inquiry by schools into their own practice, a practitioner-scholar stance modelled on the teaching hospital, and closes with a nine-point credo for evidence-informed school improvement.

Keywords

independent schools; faculty retention; graduate outcomes; family experience; school climate; educational leadership; practitioner research; Canada

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Introduction: Stay Curious and Count Something

In more than twenty years in schools – in academic research, in classrooms, working with school heads and boards – I’ve noticed how rarely schools turn their curiosity on themselves. We are good at studying our students (we assess, we track, we report), but less commonly do we ask whether what we as adults in these schools do is working, or how we would even know. We are, most of us, too busy doing the work to examine it. This report is an argument for making the time and for investing in knowing.

One person who spent his life making that argument was the late Hans Rosling, part statistician, part storyteller, part scientist, part entertainer, and above all else, a man determined to make the world better than he found it. His TED Talks on human betterment – across many domains, like health, education, and welfare – have charmed and educated many millions. And his efforts to turn giant data sets into visuals have turned a boring sea of tables into life-altering realizations for many of us.

Perhaps his finest work was in changing how we saw the world. By insisting on facts and data, he moved beyond simple-minded assertions and opinion. By insisting on staying curious, he pushed us to be better – better at the long-term project of improvement, in all things, for all people:

Being curious means being open to new information and actively seeking it out. It means embracing facts that don’t fit your worldview and trying to understand their implications. It means letting your mistakes trigger curiosity instead of embarrassment... It is quite exciting being curious, because it means you are always discovering something interesting.¹

And to stay curious, we need to inquire. We need to pay attention. That is part of the simple advice about improving healthcare outcomes offered to Harvard medical students by Atul Gawande – surgeon, *New Yorker* writer, and author of Better – when he tells us to count something. “If you count something interesting to you, I tell you: you will find something interesting.”² The application to teaching is clear: both teaching and medicine are helping professions on which our continued survival and prosperity depend, both require a mix of intellectual curiosity and diligence, and both are often the subject of hand-wringing about our collective successes and failures.

Gawande has a knack for making clear what really matters. Consider the following passage, and change medicine to teaching:

We always hope for the easy fix: the one simple change that will erase a problem in a stroke. But few things in

life work this way. Instead, success requires making a hundred small steps go right – one after the other, no slipups, no goofs, everyone pitching in. We are used to thinking of doctoring as a solitary, intellectual task. But making medicine go right is less often like making a difficult diagnosis than like making sure everyone washes their hands.³

This report is dedicated to this kind of thinking. It represents our collective pursuit of the “perpetual betterment” that Gawande asks us to push for. It is the story of what is working well and what might change. It is making a “science of performance” in schools. Done well, it leads us to ask thoughtful questions about our practice. The magical thing about research is this: we have no idea where it could take us in practical terms. We don’t know what we don’t yet know. So while there are no fixed outcomes in mind, there is a clear lodestar: we wish to build better schools.

The physicist and radical optimist David Deutsch argued that problems are inevitable, and yet all problems are soluble – and these solutions will lead to yet more interesting problems to solve.⁴ And we owe the future a moral obligation to learn, to apply what we discover, and to continue to improve. This maxim applies well in physics, of course, but so too does it apply to our schools. With better

evidence, may our schools improve and may we serve our students with even better approaches, and may we continue a long and fruitful story of human flourishing through learning more and acting on what we learn.

There is an audacity in the word better: we seek to keep what works, reconsider what doesn’t, and with clear eyes see our school for the first time again. This work is head and heart, words and data, narrative and numbers, to ensure that each student, today and tomorrow, is nurtured, supported, challenged, and achieves things otherwise thought impossible. This work is not a one-time snapshot: it is perpetual. Our students, those of our present and future, deserve nothing less.

Welcome to the first edition of *The Better Schools Report*. I hope you find it useful.

John Lambersky, PhD

Founder

Research to Practice Labs

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Every teacher and every school leader wonders: are we doing the right thing, the best thing for our students?

Parents wonder, too. Let's find out.

A Note on Topics and Sources

The following was written in the hope that we can elevate the conversation about schools and how to make them better.

It was intended to be thoughtful but not ponderous, well-evidenced but not tedious, just long enough that it could add weight and depth but not so long that it was yet another dissertation. It is meant to be accessible, rich, thought-provoking, and above all else, useful. Ideally, those of us who work in schools or who send our kids there should be helped by what's inside these pages: to stir conversation, revisit practices, and insist on a more systematic approach to teaching our young.

It was meant to inspire us to be better practitioners and thinkers about schooling.

The main topics were selected with the following imperatives in mind: they should be at the top of a list of most relevant features of schools; they should be areas with a deep

evidence base; and they should offer opportunities for action.

Teacher quality, the experience of families in our schools, and the outcomes of our graduates met those criteria – and are joined by two bookend insights, one showing why looking closely matters, and one asking how we'll know whether AI is helping. There are other places to enter the discussion on schooling, but this little list is a good start.

The sources consulted here are not exhaustive, but do represent a significant body of evidence. Claims are sourced using the best information possible. In most places, peer-reviewed, scholarly evidence, government data, or the work of think tanks supplies the spine. In some places, more popular sources are added to illustrate the broader set of conversations or concerns. The references are meant to be explored – and where possible, the existing debate is highlighted.

THE THROUGH-LINE

Three groups tell a school the truth about itself

Each sees what the school cannot see alone.

Faculty

They live the school daily – and often leave quietly.

Families

They chose the school – and talk to other families.

Graduates

They look back – with the honesty of hindsight.

Culture, experience, outcomes – studied, not assumed.

In medicine, researchers estimate it can take seventeen years for best practices to reach everyday use.¹ The figure is debated² – but at least it's a question medicine asks itself. Most schools aren't even at the point of systematically asking how effective their practice actually is.

We want **thinking** schools. Not blaming teachers for not keeping up with research, but infusing our schools with knowledge about what works and keeping a relentless eye on results – drawing on what's known in the research and what's working in our own hallways and classrooms, so that knowing is woven into how decisions get made.

We want schools built to learn.

We study our students relentlessly. We rarely study whether what we offer them works.

Invest in knowing.

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Look Closer: What the Data Reveals

These are two beautiful towns in the UK. Can you spot the difference?



One is Micklethwaite, England, and the other is Beddgelert, Wales. They both are very picturesque. Both are wonderful places to live and to visit. But there is a very big difference between these two towns.

Forgive yourself for not seeing it at first glance. You would have to look very closely indeed – not at the streetscapes, but at the data. Because one is in England and one is in Wales, there is a profound difference in the schooling outcomes. In Wales, the photograph on the right, there are far fewer people who can read and write well enough to function in society.

According to the [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#), a leading independent economics research institute, the recent PISA data show that Welsh 15-year-olds achieved their worst literacy showing, performing well below the OECD



average, and well below the rest of the UK.¹ And why? This huge literacy gap isn't due to socioeconomic factors; remarkably, disadvantaged children in England perform at or above the average for all children in Wales. This gap isn't due to varying funding levels between the two places, which are quite similar.²

The reason? According to the IFS, the "longstanding differences in policy and approach, such as lower levels of external accountability and less use of data."³ Welsh children are getting worse outcomes for reasons we can fix: use the best instructional techniques, track the results, and have a focus on improvement.

Kathy Rastle, a Professor of Cognitive Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London, who discussed the PISA results on the BBC's [More or Less](#), put the point more sharply in writing afterwards:

The performance of Wales is truly dire. Their average score is significantly below the OECD average and way below the England average. Yet, it's the distribution of scores that is most concerning: 29% of Welsh 15-year-olds fall below the baseline literacy needed to participate fully in society.

Children who leave school with poor literacy face a whole range of negative outcomes, and this state of affairs also puts a drag on the economy. Yet, while England transitioned to evidence-based instructional methods almost 20 years ago, the Welsh government has continued to allow schools to use methods that were discredited decades ago.⁴

And this is not just one scholar's view. When England refocused reading instruction around systematic synthetic phonics, economists evaluating the national rollout found it produced measurable gains, and that the benefits persisted for exactly the children most likely to struggle, narrowing the gap for disadvantaged pupils.⁵

While the particulars of this example are from overseas, these differences exist in our schools, too. The differences between the highest-performing schools and the lowest-

performing schools are dramatic. And even more dramatic is the difference between classrooms within a school. Researchers have consistently found that the differences between teachers inside the same school have powerful effects on reading and mathematics achievement – a larger effect than simply shrinking class size.⁶ Teacher quality is, by some estimates, two to three times more influential than any other school factor, yet it can't be reliably spotted from a teacher's credentials or years of service.⁷

The reading wars are worth space on their own, but the lesson to draw is that one system rigorously and thoughtfully learned what worked, applied it, and kept a focus on the outcomes. The gap can be measured. And it has a moral dimension, not simply a numerical one.

Mississippi > Connecticut

Literacy keeps appearing in these examples for a reason: reading is where educational outcomes are most rigorously measured, so it's where the cost of not knowing shows up first and most clearly.

One lived example of this is the recent profound change in the performance of Mississippi on national US reading tests. Adjusted for income, Mississippi has the strongest reading scores at 4th grade of any state in the union. Better than New Jersey, New York, California, and Connecticut.⁸

Mississippi made many changes, but one key change was adopting the science of reading, a focus on student achievement data, and a relentless pursuit of success for every kid in the class. This is an example where research was put into practice, to the betterment of a generation of fortunate kids in Mississippi.

Yet what happened in Mississippi was not exactly luck, of course: the success there was the fruit of careful design and discipline. And while laudable for Mississippi, the overall finding should trouble us. **Whether a child learns to read this well still depends too much on which state, which town, which classroom they happen to land in. No child's education should rely on chance: chance of teacher, chance of school, chance of county, or chance of country.**

Invest in knowing.

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"If you want to ask the question, 'Which states are helping kids coming from difficult circumstances learn as much as they can?' Mississippi is now doing much better than many other states, including wealthier states in affluent progressive areas."

– Michael Petrilli, president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.⁹

Look Closer

Faculty Retention: Keeping the Right People

Signal Through the Noise: A Summary of Key Research Findings

- The success of our schools hinges on the quality of our teachers above any other factor.
- Across the globe and close to home, teachers are reporting burnout, stress, and dissatisfaction.
- Teacher turnover in some settings is high, and the supply of high-performing teachers is low.
- The differences between effective and ineffective teachers on student achievement are significant.
- Leadership has a key role to play here: building teaching communities that attract and develop the teachers who will push our schools to the next level.
- Exit interviews are a start, but there is an opportunity to invest in knowing about faculty culture before key teachers leave or disengage.



A school culture that keeps families happy is one that keeps families in their school, and keeps kids engaged and learning. To do that, we need our best teachers at the top of their game. What is driving morale – up or down – in our schools? What is leading to deepened commitment and execution – or quiet quitting? And what can we do to improve this key driver of what makes our schools great?

We know that, of all the factors under a school's control, **teacher effectiveness is the**

single most important factor in shaping the outcomes of the students in our schools.¹ This finding is clear and cuts through the noise of decades of school research. It has been shown time and time again in our own classrooms and hallways, and in our gut.

But we also know that it is harder and harder to retain teachers in our schools, and teacher retention is a leading question in our schools.² The most recent data from the OECD suggests that across leading school systems, 6.5% of

teachers in K–12 settings outright left teaching in 2022/23.³ Independent schools are vulnerable, too. According to a [Vanderbilt study](#) drawing on NAIS networks, “Nearly 1 in 5 educators are on the brink of leaving. Among them, 12.5% say they are seriously considering exiting the teaching profession altogether, even though they are not yet of retirement age.”⁴ And according to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) (NCES), private/independent teachers leave the profession at higher rates (12%) than public teachers (8%).⁵

Closer to home, while specific data for independent schools in Canada is sparse, a 2025 survey of over 5,000 Canadian teachers [found](#) that “45% have considered leaving the profession in the past year.”⁶ The *Globe and*

Mail’s recent in-depth [“Marked Absent”](#) examination used Ministry of Education data in Ontario to paint a worrying picture of the mental wellness of our teachers, and the size of the related mental health absences: burnout and workplace stress are ballooning, and the cost of sick days in Ontario public boards is up about 50% since the 2018/2019 school year.⁷ And add to this a [worsening teacher shortage](#) in Ontario, according to Ministry of Education documents uncovered by The Canadian Press, and we have even more reason to get this right.⁸

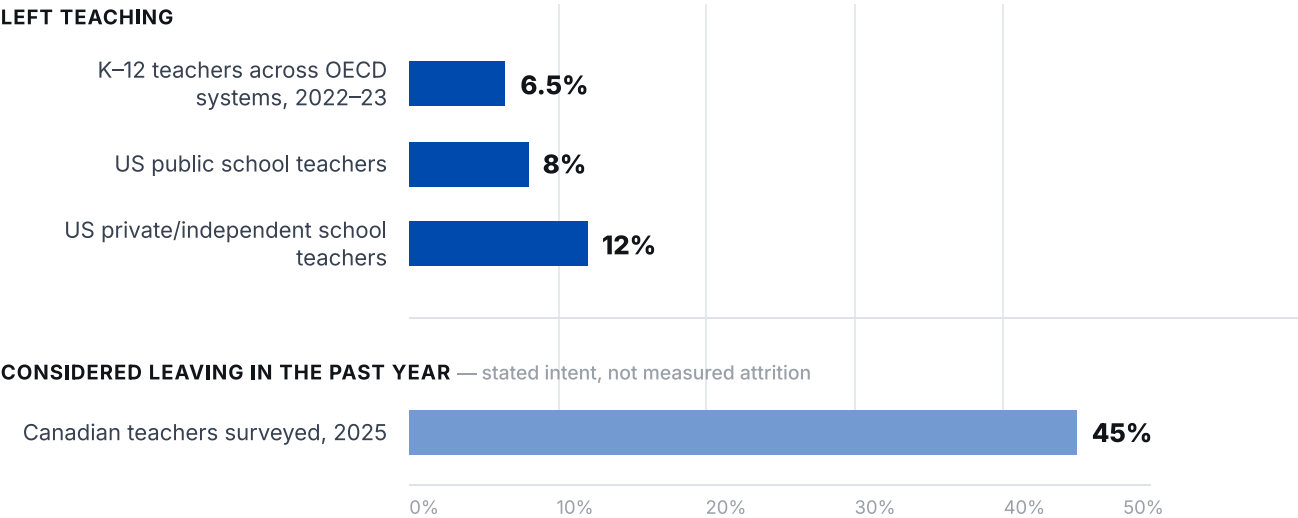
The Costs – In Dollars and Beyond

Teacher turnover is expensive. Some of this expense is financial and easy to calculate, and these formal costs are steep: a [synthesis](#) of US

TEACHER TURNOVER

Teachers are leaving — and more are thinking about it

Attrition and attrition risk across systems



Sources: OECD, Education at a Glance 2025; NCES, 2024; Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2025.

studies from the Learning Policy Institute put the replacement cost at roughly \$12,000 to \$25,000 USD per teacher, depending on district size.⁹ Those costs are not trivial, and they quietly eat up programming opportunities. These costs live in line items in our budgets.

The financial cost, however, is in some ways the smallest and the easiest to define. Faculty and staff turnover can be profoundly disruptive. This disruption in schools taxes everyone. It taxes HR departments, who absorb the posting, hiring, and onboarding. It taxes leadership, already facing long hours.

And even more relevant to the quality of our schools: **staffing disruption erodes the student and family experience.** The relationship between our schools and our families is built on trust, dependability, friendly faces, energy, and enthusiasm. The very reasons our students succeed are under threat in our schools. The largest study conducted on the impact of teacher turnover is clear: drawing on 850,000 student observations in New York City over eight years, the researchers conclude that teacher turnover has “significant and negative impact on student achievement” – and this is even more true for diverse student populations.¹⁰ Desiree Carver-Thomas and Linda Darling-Hammond put it well when they say “teacher turnover takes a toll on schools and students.”¹¹ Most importantly, as researchers from Stanford and the University of

Virginia point out, there are major differences in the effectiveness of teachers; it is especially important to keep the highest-performing faculty, and keep them at the top of their game.¹² As David Green, chair of the Peel District School Board, observes, **“Stability in the classroom is important. You get more out of the students because the students build that relationship and that respect that they have for that teacher.”**¹³

Getting this right, reducing turnover and supporting our faculty, is a moral imperative. Nothing less than the well-being of our students is at stake.

The Good News? We Can Improve.

The Caveat? Our Current Approaches Might Not Get Us There.

Here’s where schools would be wise to do two things: first, conduct better exit interview processes to move past contrived collegiality to understand what’s really going on; and second, don’t wait until people have left to learn what’s wrong – build the kind of culture that finds problems while they’re still fixable.

Anecdotally, exit interviews in our schools are more common than they were a generation ago. And we would be wise to continue conducting formal exit interviews with those who are choosing to move on. We have joined the more than 80% of organizations that use exit interviews to improve the performance of their

organization.¹⁴ The literature on such interviews in many fields, including helping professions like education, is solid and abiding: we need to ask questions about how to improve from those who choose to leave our communities and us.

Yet, while many schools conduct exit interviews to learn why colleagues moved on, the answers are often not as illuminating as we would like. We have known for a long time now that while well-intentioned, the in-house exit interview can leave some gaps in understanding. Most departing colleagues are reluctant to “burn any bridges”; they might be seeking references, and they simply may want to “let sleeping dogs lie.”¹⁵ All of these motivations are understandable, of course, but they point to a need for better clarity than we currently have: why are teachers leaving our schools, and what can we do to reduce that loss?

Even with well-meaning HR professionals now supporting these processes, we might not learn what we need to learn. The exit interview literature is peppered with cautions here: some find little evidence in favour of them,¹⁶ and others find that departing employees sometimes feel reluctant to give honest answers.¹⁷ Add to that the unique characteristics of our Canadian independent school landscape: we have a relatively close-knit community of independent schools. Many teachers might feel that being honest, especially in CAIS/CIS networks where

reputations spread quickly, comes at a cost too great.

A third party is more likely to get an honest answer.¹⁸ We need the key drivers of success in our schools, our teachers, to be able to help us improve the culture and conditions in the school. Our programs – academic success, re-enrolment, and the reputation shared by our graduates after they leave us – depend on it. And we need to act on what we find. Some studies suggest that “only about 50 percent of organizations that conduct exit interviews actually use the information.”¹⁹

The lesson is consistent: **learn from faculty honestly, ideally through a third party, and then actually act on what you hear – most organizations don’t.**

Leaders Matter

There is some excellent news, though: school leadership matters, especially when it comes to retaining teachers and shaping the school culture. The evidence has been emerging for some time, including my own work in peer-reviewed *Leadership and Policy in Schools*.²⁰ While school leadership can’t always be in the classroom, they do shape the ways teachers come to school, how they perform, commitment levels, and their decision to leave.

The research base underscoring the importance of school leadership continues to grow. In 2021, the Wallace Foundation released *How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic*

Synthesis of Two Decades of Research, a synthesis of 219 studies which affirmed that school leaders' effects are "both greater and broader than previously believed: greater in the impact on student achievement and broader in affecting other important outcomes, including teacher satisfaction and retention (especially among high-performing teachers)..."²¹

Research drawing on independent teachers' experiences in the US through NAIS data pointed out something that will resonate with faculty lounges everywhere: the single most important factor shaping a teacher's decision to stay, or to suffer "emotional drift," is school leadership.²² This lever of school improvement, effective leadership, is perhaps one of the most powerful we have in sustaining thriving communities of teachers.

But the need for action is pressing. We need to reduce the threat of turnover in our schools. While we know what works on a large scale, each school needs to learn the issues specific to them and their culture. Burnout and morale, across the globe and in our own schools, are key drivers of teacher turnover.

Our job is to learn: What does this look like in our schools? What is driving faculty away, and what is deepening their commitment? And how can we ensure that our reputation among educators is such that we draw the best and brightest to serve our students and families?

Invest in knowing.

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~~Churn?~~ Better.

~~Disrupt?~~ Improve.

Improvement, not disruption.

Steady betterment, not mere churn.

Knowing, and choosing well.

Family Experience: Hearing What Surveys Miss

Signal Through the Noise: A Summary of Key Research Findings

- Voluntary attrition is a source of concern for many schools.
- Word of mouth recommendations are the single most important source of recruitment.
- Parent satisfaction is the key driver of positive word of mouth.
- Most schools struggle to learn the story of their school.



Every school has two stories: the one it has in its viewbook, and the one parents and students talk about in social settings. The latter kind fills classrooms, and sadly, it's the sort of conversation that can be hard to find, but it is critical to hear. What is the conversation about your school? And how would we know?

No one needs to overstate the importance of enrolment: the revenues sustain the viability of schools, and the kids who join us shape our schools and make them better, richer places. While data doesn't exist for Canada, we know that voluntary attrition is something schools watch: the Enrollment Management Association (EMA) in the US found that more than a third (36%) of schools experienced increases in attrition, and for as many as 15% of schools it was significant.¹ And despite the growth seen in the industry as a whole, there is no school-level data as to the reasoning behind families moving

their children to different schools. We understand the national trends as well as the personal experiences that we have, but very little in between – the difference between belief and reality.

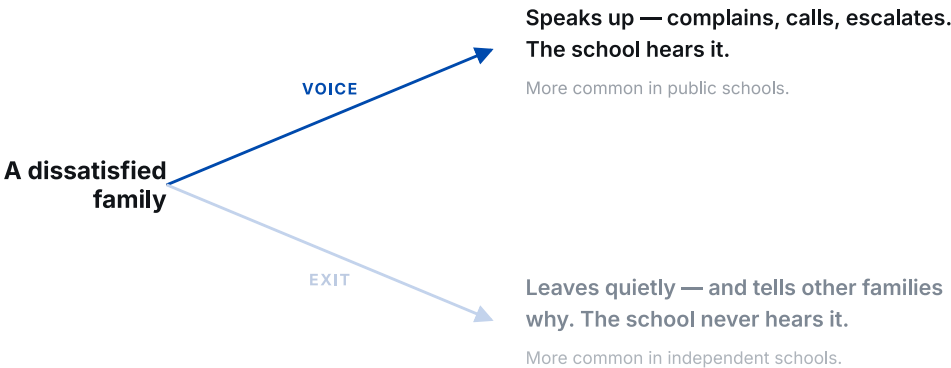
Figuring out what parents and families think of our schools – of the value we deliver, of the satisfaction we provide – is a challenge, to say the least. We know from our lived experience that prospective families trust current parents more than they trust the school’s own messaging. And we know from research, too – research at Harvard, using a study of Boston families, points out that parents don’t weigh all information about a school equally – they draw especially on parents like them who have experience with a school, and on the basis of “affinity and authority.”² And other researchers echo this, arguing that affluent, educated

parents lean hardest on neighbourhood and social networks.³ These studies reflect what we know: **our school tours and our viewbooks are valuable, but words from parents’ and kids’ peer groups are vital.**

Half a century ago, the economist Albert Hirschman gave us the vocabulary for what’s happening here. When people grow dissatisfied with an institution, he argued, they have two moves: exit (quietly leave), or voice (speak up and try to make things better). The two trade off against each other; they are not equally useful to the school. Voice is a gift, of course: it tells us something is wrong while there is still time to act. Exit tells us nothing, or worse: it tells us too late. The family is already gone, and their reasons remain unknown to the school.⁴

EXIT AND VOICE

Two ways a family responds — and only one reaches the school



After Hirschman, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty (1970).

And nowhere is parent perception more important than in the satisfaction of our current families. When our parents feel their children are well served, they tell their friends; when they feel the school isn't meeting their needs, their social network knows. And as parents, we are very sensitive to the experience of our children. We know this from our own experience, and research in international education points to the same pattern: **"Parent satisfaction has the greatest impact on the parent's likelihood to recommend the school and the school leadership must be sure to carefully measure parent satisfaction while also finding ways to improve."**⁵ What is driving that satisfaction isn't always as obvious as we imagine. We might be certain families come for the new STEM wing or our IB program, but the parents at pickup are actually talking about whether their child has one adult who knows their name, or whether the lunch situation is harried, or how the school handled a tough moment with a struggling child. Thoughtful research from Cardus about the selection process of Ontario independent school families spells this out: families emphasize safety and belonging, a nurturing and supportive climate, and the quality of the teaching faculty.⁶ (The same researchers point out that the most relevant way parents find independent schools is overwhelmingly through word of mouth.)

Finding the Real Story

A dissatisfied family rarely storms out or leaves over a single complaint. Hirschman knew this very well, and in ways that will speak to anyone who has attended an independent school: the greater our loyalty to an organization, the more patient we become with it, the longer we hold off from criticizing it, before we finally give up on it entirely. Independent school families are loyal, by their very nature; after all, they have chosen us, dedicated themselves to us, and believed in us. So dissatisfaction tends to erode in silence – the sense of belonging, the feeling of being known, the conviction that the child is growing – until a family that seemed content is suddenly gone, having said little along the way.⁷ Those departing families, and the ones who never joined us at all, are a large and untapped source of information.

We can learn, improve, and reduce the number of students and families who leave us. The EMA makes some good, clear recommendations when it comes to combating attrition, surfaced from their members' schools. For example, they share stories from leaders at the Viewpoint School in California, who argue that **"It's critical to get the truth about why families are leaving, and it's difficult to get a transparent answer when you're doing it yourself. An independent party can better get the real answers."**⁸

But better than learning why families leave is building the kind of school they never want to

walk away from. And that work requires quiet but focused curiosity, beyond a simple survey. None of this lives in the viewbook.

The connection between a school and its families lives in its people: in the teachers who stay, who know our kids, who make the promise real every day. That is the story worth knowing, and the schools that truly know it are the ones that ask and listen.

Invest in knowing.

How Do We Know?

How do we know if our graduates are succeeding at whatever comes next?

How do we know if we fulfilled our promises made?

Let's ask: What about our schools should we improve, what should we get rid of, and what should never change?

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Graduate Outcomes: Beyond the Destination List

Signal Through the Noise: A Summary of Key Research Findings

- Enrolment across the country is up, yet it is hard to find strong evidence for the value added by our schools.
- Schools tend to focus on inputs ("what we did") and not outputs ("how our students did when they left us").
- Many parents are worried about grade inflation – and the value of the credential.
- Learning about the experiences of our graduates is an opportunity to improve our programming, share our story, and demonstrate value.

As those who work in schools, we want to attribute the success of our students to our programs. More than that, we also want to tell that story to prospective parents. Yet, thus far, attempts to examine the specific value of our programs and understand how well our graduates are prepared for whatever comes next have been lacking. We need to be more curious about how we're serving our students, and where the gaps remain, before our graduates face unmet challenges in their next steps.

A recent *Globe and Mail* feature, "Private school enrolment keeps climbing as parents look to give their kids an edge," puts into stark relief what many of us notice in admissions: interest in independent schooling is only increasing. "The number of students enrolled in private or independent schools grew by about 9 percent between

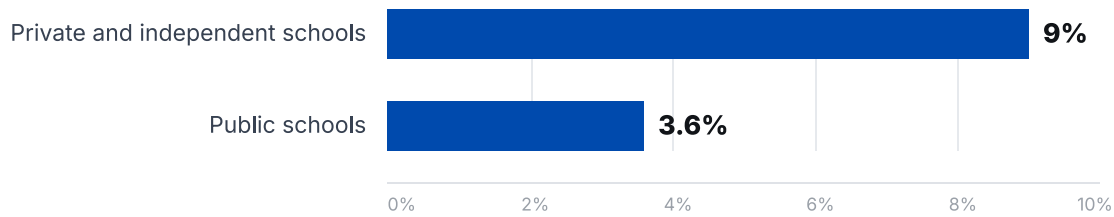
the 2019-20 and 2023-24 school years, according to Statistics Canada. In comparison, the number of public school enrolments increased by 3.6 percent during the same period. (Public school is by far the most common choice, with more than five million students enrolled, compared to about 465,000 in private and independent schools.)"¹ Parents want to give their children an advantage in an ever-more competitive world. **They look to independent schools for academic excellence, and they trust that their children will be changed forever by attending our schools. They trust our schools will be great. This trust is sacred.**

We know our graduates go on to do great, inspiring things. But how are we sure that our programs are the drivers helping them? The first challenge is that we attract and select students from high-achieving families. Research shows that those admissions selection biases are a major part of our schools' success. In measuring the comparative effectiveness of public and private schools in the US, researchers have

ENROLMENT

Independent school enrolment is growing far faster

Growth in student enrolment, Canada, 2019–20 to 2023–24



Source: Statistics Canada, reported in The Globe and Mail, 2026.

found something we might already suspect: “by simply controlling for variation in family income, the majority of these differences in outcomes were eliminated.”² Yes, our students do great things. But it’s not always clear how our programs are the central part of that story.

There is good news, though: researchers have demonstrated that a school’s actual contribution can be separated from the students it admits. Doing so just takes rigorous measurement. Economists at Harvard and Columbia, in a landmark study, found that a teacher’s measurable “value-added” has real and lasting impact: students taught by more effective teachers went on to higher lifetime earnings.³ **The best schooling, the best teachers, matter, and the difference in lifetime outcomes is measurable and real.**

Closer to home, similar work has been done that might give us pause. In the most

thoroughgoing Canadian study, Statistics Canada followed a national cohort of students from ages 15 to 23, to understand whether private-school students outperformed public-school students – and if so, was it simply because of the selection bias of the students they enrol. This study found that there indeed was a raw advantage enjoyed by the private-school students: higher test scores and better rates of university attendance and graduation. But the reason was less comforting: the achievement gap was overwhelmingly explained by the socioeconomic characteristics of the students these schools enrolled. The study found little school effect in the later academic success of private-school students.⁴ The study has its limits – much of what schools do is relational and cultural, and the study’s methodology couldn’t explain the entire share of the difference. But the lesson is there: **a destination list of our graduates is not always an honest reflection of the value of the work we do in our schools every day.**

The within-group variation is one factor to keep central in our thinking. A recent BC study tracking students into post-secondary found that while graduates of Catholic and preparatory/IB independent schools do enter and complete post-secondary at higher rates than their public-school peers, the gap *within* the independent sector is wider than the gap between independent and public schooling.⁵ The degree of variation in outcomes lies at the level of the individual school.

The research, then, is clear at the macro level: much of the success of a student can be attributed to their socioeconomic status, family contributions, and inherent aptitudes, of course. But the highest-value teaching does matter. Of the things our school can control – the quality of our instruction and the rigour of our program – that factor needs to be at the centre of our conversations.

This paradox offers an opportunity to learn. On the one hand, we've never had more interest in our schools. On the other, we're not as sure as we'd like that our schools are performing as well as they could, and as a field we haven't yet scaled up our investigation into the outcomes of our work – how our programs and people leave a legacy long after the university admission process. Too often, schools assume the work of understanding their students ends at the graduation ceremony.

This is the kind of opportunity that is so exciting in our schools: we can build on what's known more broadly from the expertise of leading scholars and marry that with a study of our own communities. Through a relentlessly curious approach, we can build a rich, longitudinal account of graduate experience and feed that back to improve our programs. At the level of the individual school, **being consistently curious about the quality of our programs is critical if we are going to meet the needs of our current and future students.**

Grade Inflation?

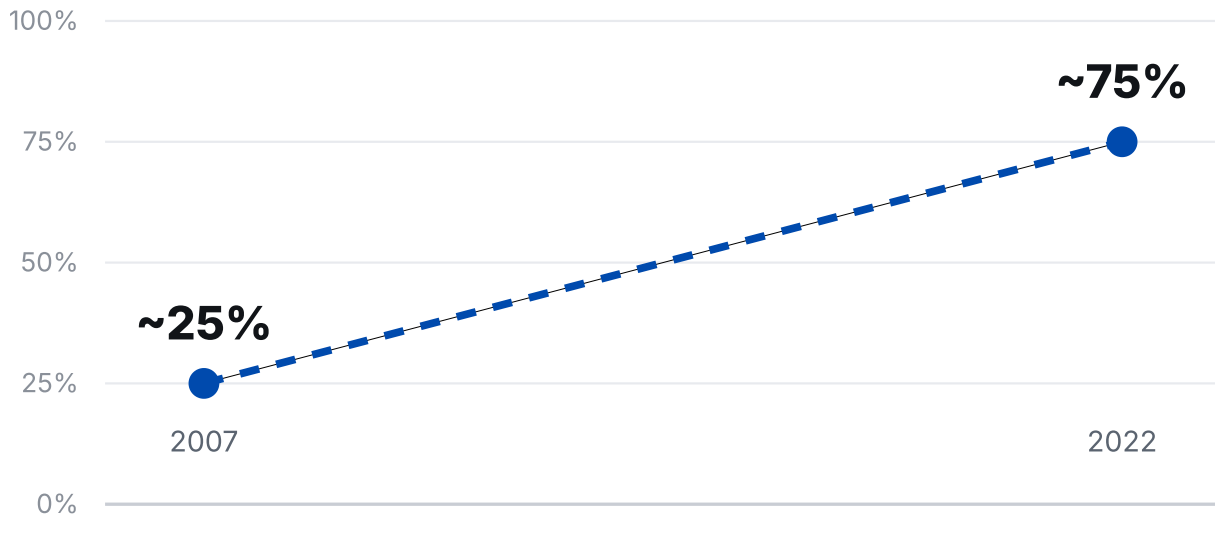
One concern is persistently worrying for parents who are considering private school, those with kids currently enrolled, and those who are about to graduate from them and head to university: the possibility of grade inflation eroding the meaning of our programs. The credential a school sends its graduates off with assumes the grade behind it means something. But here there is reason to not rest on our laurels.

News outlets have been running worrying headlines for some time. A 2022 *Toronto Star* analysis of Council of Ontario Universities data found that grade 12 marks have climbed steadily. In the previous 15 years, the proportion of students entering Ontario's top universities with very high marks, defined as having a 90%+ average, rose from roughly a quarter to nearly three quarters. And the number of students arriving at university with a 95%+ average grew

GRADE INFLATION

Share of Ontario university entrants with a 90%+ high-school average

Toronto Star analysis of Council of Ontario Universities data, top-ranked universities



Source: Hurley, 2022 — Toronto Star analysis of Council of Ontario Universities data

by some 700–885% at Waterloo and Western.⁶ The reasons for this are complex – inflation is one possible culprit, but so is more responsive teaching – yet the anxieties around this development are discussed around the dining room tables of families and in faculty lounges in high schools and universities across the country.

The University of Waterloo's engineering program has, for some years, quietly – yet famously – maintained a school-level adjustment that raises or lowers applicants' grades based on how previous graduates of those high schools actually performed in their first year courses.⁷ This suggests that there is a gap between the marks high schools award

and the ability of those students to succeed in their chosen programs.

This possible unpreparedness has serious consequences. A 2019 study across four Ontario campuses, *A Call to Action: Academic Skill Deficiencies in Four Ontario Universities*, found that high-school grades predicted university performance far less strongly than the system assumes; as well, that a significant share of students admitted with A averages were unprepared for the challenges of work at university.⁸ The researchers, working on the front lines in our university system, wonder if this gap in preparation might be one factor in the rising stress students report in the transition to university.

This issue is as urgent as ever. In June 2026, the *Globe and Mail*, in a provocative extended editorial on “The hard costs of easy As,” warned that we “need to take decisive action to reverse the trend before grades become entirely meaningless and students are left without any signal about their true performance.”⁹ Our families deserve to know, with data, the quality of the schooling and credentials they have invested in.

Understanding where our programs are excellent and where they didn’t meet our hopes is what graduate outcomes research is all about. This work is perhaps the most central to ensuring institutional relevance through educational excellence: it’s where we assess our own practice with honest and curious reflection. What mattered most to our students in their next chapter? What gaps existed in our approaches that our graduates noticed? And what about our schools should we never change? This work informs our current practice, and it helps communicate our excellence. We want to prove our strengths with evidence we can stand behind.

Invest in knowing.

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AI in the Classroom: Evidence Before Enthusiasm

There has been much talk of AI disruption. Hardly a day goes by without a worrying headline in leading newspapers, or long and concerning think-pieces in magazines exploring the pitfalls and perils of this new and powerful technology. Are these tools “co-workers” for students, powering new levels of attainment – or mostly used as cheating machines to short-circuit the necessarily effortful work of learning? Schools aren’t sure if they should block AI, invite it in, or make it a centrepiece. Among teachers, students, graduates, and parents, worries are starting to show – and we don’t have clarity on governing its use or measuring its impact.

Students are wondering how to use AI and what it is doing to their ability to think. A recent survey conducted by RAND found that students reported increasing levels of AI use, and that they worried that AI use was decreasing their cognitive abilities: 67% of students agreed that the more they use AI for schoolwork, the more it will harm their critical thinking, a figure that is up more than ten points in ten months.¹ RAND itself argues that, while it is likely to be subverted, “a schoolwide policy explicitly forbidding it could at least dampen students’ use of AI for this purpose, even if it cannot stop it completely.” And how might schools forbid the technology? As the *New York Times* reported recently, the arms race between the AI bots and the detectors is

School heads hear more and more about being future ready, future proofed, or something that rhymes with that. And nowhere is this concern more pressing than in the adoption of generative AI in the classroom. We hear that our students will be left behind if they don’t embrace it. The jobs of the future will be fewer, we are told, but those that remain will be AI-powered. And all of this comes with a feeling of inevitability. As one technology leader in the field put it, “The flood is coming: do you want to learn to swim or get the sandbags?” It feels urgent and like we need to do something.

But what?

mostly being won by the bots: **even process work like outlines and drafts can be faked by technology, including a custom-selected number of typos.** The *Times* quotes Jenny Maxwell, head of education at Grammarly’s parent company, Superhuman, who called the race between detection and evasion “ultimately, a dead end. Bigger cat, bigger mouse.”²

The worry is, in plain language, that the use of AI will decrease students' ability to perform the tasks AI is asked to do: research, writing, and thinking. Cognitive scientists call it cognitive offloading, effectively handing a mental task to an external tool. On the one hand, it is nothing new: writing itself offloaded memory. As Nicholas Carr notes in the influential book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Plato recorded the ancient worry that the invention of writing would erode our ability to recite epic poems from memory (it did).³ What's new, as Brookings' Rebecca Winthrop argues, is when it now happens: when a student offloads the work of analysis or writing before those capacities have formed, they aren't delegating a skill they possess. Students are skipping the effortful practice by which the skill is built in the first place, and might never attain it.⁴ **Learning takes effort – our brains literally get rewired when we learn new things – and AI might prevent that deep, focused cognition that human brains thrive on.**

Unsurprisingly, teachers are worried. A June 2026 NPR/Ipsos poll of K–12 teachers found that about three in four see AI as having larger implications for education than past technological changes.⁵ And while 78% believe responsible AI use should be part of the curriculum, just one in three say their school has any formal policy on student use of AI. And a curious paradox: most teachers report using AI themselves, predominantly for lesson

planning and administrative work rather than instruction, even as a majority worry it is making it harder for students to build critical-thinking skills and harder for teachers to assess what students actually know. According to a survey conducted by the College Board, every principal surveyed reported concern about AI's effect on academic integrity: 59% were very concerned, the rest somewhat.⁶

And researchers like the educational psychologist Daniel Willingham, of the University of Virginia, have sounded the alarm in terms that would resonate with teachers who lived through the last two decades of technological churn.

Educational technology has persistently failed to deliver on much-hyped promises.⁷

One-to-one laptops were going to change everything. Then, of course, Smart Boards. Then MOOCs, then open educational resources, then flipped classrooms, each arriving with the same glittering promise and the same quiet threat that the schools that didn't sign on would be left behind. None delivered what was sold.

Willingham watched the whole parade and sees no reason to treat this moment differently: "I am no more optimistic that LLMs will 'change everything' given that these other innovations delivered much narrower, weaker benefits than we were promised. So. Cheating for sure, and benefits that are unnamed and uncertain."⁸

The point is not that *new* is *bad*. The point is our children deserve an education founded on what

we know works, not what edu-futurists are selling. We need to be discerning, to know more rather than merely guess. While innovation has its place, that place needs to be earned with evidence.

Willingham's skepticism is about the track record. Justin Reich, who directs MIT's Teaching Systems Lab, points at something more unsettling – not that AI will underdeliver, exactly, but that no one can honestly claim to know either way:

No one knows what an effective policy for managing generative AI in schools is because it's such a new technology. No one knows what good practices are. No one knows what good teaching looks like with AI or what makes for good learning with AI. There is no rigorous research that demonstrates that anything anyone is saying right now about how to use these tools is effective.

But for these creative things to transform learning, we need to keep centered the question of, Are we giving educators and students advice that we know leads to better learning outcomes? I am in favor of that thing that makes students better writers and communicators, whether that's AI or tablets or the web or

pencils or rocks. But in the absence of evidence of efficacy of AI, I do worry that there's too much to be rewarded by making up answers and not enough to be rewarded from taking the time to come up with good answers.⁹

One way schools can ensure their programs aren't being hollowed out by AI is to use student work as a source of information about the success of our programs: student work becomes data. As Reich puts it: "If you're bringing lots of AI into the English classroom, you should be grabbing stacks of old student work from 2015 and comparing it to student work in 2025. Are you really seeing improvements in whatever it is that you say you want students to be able to do when they're in your English language art classrooms? And if you're not seeing differences, or if you're seeing degradations, if you're seeing things that are getting worse, you should be ready to revisit that."¹⁰

Does your school have ways to listen to these important stories?

Our schools offer limitless opportunities to uncover what is working, what is working best, and what is quietly failing. Perhaps nowhere are the stakes as high as they are with the adoption of AI in classrooms: judicious and careful adoption might yield improvement, but a careless, headlong jump into the unknown might just produce concerning steps backwards in student achievement.

"One great starting point for people in leadership positions is to really listen to students and teachers about their experiences in schools since ChatGPT has become more widely available. We have an amazing interview with a young man named Leandro, who spent his entire senior year doing all his homework with ChatGPT. He spent a bunch of time using multiple tools to fabricate homework and have it be not detectable. And the interviewer asked, 'What do you wish your teachers would know about your AI use?' And he was like, 'They really need to learn how to use detectors and to find kids who are doing this.' And the interviewer said, 'But you would have been caught.' And he said, 'Yeah, I wish somebody had caught me at the beginning of the year and told me not to waste my year not learning.'"

– MIT professor Justin Reich¹¹

Some schools feature Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation* as family reading while also turning more and more to digital tools – contrary to the advice of Haidt himself. Haidt explained in a recent interview:

The parents are now seeing that the devices are a problem. The teachers have seen it from the beginning. The superintendents – they might've been wowed by the consultants early on – but they're seeing the problems now, too... We conducted a gigantic experiment on all American children by doing this – without any control group, without good evidence of efficacy. We just did it. And it looks like it's been a disastrous experiment. And so I think we need to undo it.¹²

While generative AI is certainly not going away, how our schools address this new technology will be critical to our success, and that of our graduates. Before we recreate the destructive ways social media affected our students, we should choose wisely. This debate isn't about being opposed to technology: it is about being discerning. When the loudest voices tell us that we have no choice but to embrace maximal AI, we would be wise to be sure that doing so serves our students.

Let's look inside our schools to understand well, with care and depth, what the experiences of our students, teachers, and families are with

this new technology. The consequences of carelessness are heavy, and our key groups – families, faculty, students – will bear the price of getting it wrong.

Invest in knowing.

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On AI in particular, Jonathan Haidt, whose *Anxious Generation* sits in many parents' hands, makes the techno-skeptic case bluntly. In an April 2026 TED Talk, he argues that these new technologies are simply too powerful to experiment with on our children. He says we should protect children from needless and reckless experimentation: "I think techno-skepticism is the right attitude for people today – especially for parents and legislators. Because when it comes to children, these companies have earned our distrust.... human beings are ultrasocial creatures who need to matter to one another in order to flourish. We are so brilliant that we've invented technologies that can replace us, that can take us out of each other's lives. But human connection is not optional. It's who we are."

– Jonathan Haidt¹³

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"Future-ready?" Maybe.

**Skilled, learned, and
evergreen?**

Even better.

A Credo for Better Schools

1. **Focus on the important things.** Don't be afraid to subtract in schools. Schools can only do so many things well. Ensure they are the right things.
2. **Look beyond the simplicity of our own narratives.** Celebrate, of course. But importantly, treat our schools as places of inquiry.
3. **Check the results of our actions.** Measure, check, investigate – whenever possible.
4. **Increase and diffuse knowledge.** Find what's working, name it, and spread it around.
5. **Insist on evidence.** Don't be seduced by mere speculation. New techniques, technology, and approaches have to prove their worth.
6. **Marry the big picture with the grassroots.** Know the high-level research about schools and learning. Apply it with an understanding of our own schools.
7. **Adopt the stance of practitioner-scholars.** In a teaching hospital, the people treating patients are the same ones asking how to treat them better.
8. **Don't confuse merely different for better.** Improvement matters, not the colour of the carpets.
9. **Be open to learning we aren't quite right – yet.** Perpetual betterment requires it.

Conclusion

In some ways, it is easy to be a pessimist about schools. The field of schooling can appear gripped by concern, disarray, and disillusionment. We worry that the value of schooling has declined. We worry that it might be a waste of time. We hear about unschooling, deschooling, and that we should simply give every child a laptop.¹ In so many ways, we are told that schools get in the way of education.

And larger, more existential fears threaten the whole notion of the wisdom of long-term, expensive, time-consuming investments in schooling: on a warming planet, seeded with danger, confronted by near-unimaginable technological change, it can be easy to be somewhat uninspired to engage in the kind of effortful, deep thinking this report encourages.

But in much more important ways, betting on schooling is the only option we have. All of the scientific breakthroughs we are counting on to safeguard and improve the lives of billions of us are going to require schools. For our great

cultural projects of literature and the arts to continue to have resonance, we will need schools. For our young people to be as well as possible, as healthy, socially connected, to thrive, we will need welcoming schools to gather together in community and learn. We will always need schools. And those schools will need to be even better than the ones we have today.

We owe it to those from our past who made the once-miraculous fruits of civilization ordinary, and those future humans who haven't yet been given those gifts.

Thank you for reading *The Better Schools Report*.

References

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Every school believes it knows its own story.
The ones who truly know have asked their
families, their faculty, and their graduates, and
listened.

If this report left you wondering what that story
is at your own school, let's talk.

Faculty

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Families

·

Graduates

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