

## Evaluating education

A researcher at the University of New Brunswick is making policy recommendations that could have sweeping effects on the American public education system. Doug Willms, chair of the Canadian Research Institute for Social Policy (CRISP) at UNB, has been elected to the National Academy of Education (NAEd) - a group that is currently making suggestions to policymakers about education reform in the United States. NAEd is an honorary society of education-focused researchers and policymakers based in the US that currently has 174 members - only four of whom are Canadian.

Willms first began to work with NAEd when he presented a paper to the society discussing education reforms last November in the wake of the election of President Barack Obama.

The paper was presented to a panel of experts and outlined value-added models of school systems through accountability and evaluation. "That panel is now producing a report that will go to policymakers on Capitol Hill," says Willms. "It's quite exciting." Willms is delighted to have been elected as a member - but he says he's more excited for the opportunities it will bring to network with other education researchers. "The real opportunity is being able to work alongside other people with more distinguished careers than me on various issues, who have really dedicated their life to education research" says Willms.

"It can open up new directions."

## Structuring school systems

CRISP, a multi-disciplinary policy research institute, focuses on improving education and care of children and youth as well as training social scientists in quantitative research methods. While his work with NAEd has dealt with US school systems, CRISP's research mainly focuses on Canadian schools. "We look at the performance of schooling systems and how they relate to the systems' structures, to see why some school systems are better than others. We also look at social class implications," says Willms. The group also examines early literacy in children, and has been working with a longitudinal study of close to 22,000 Canadian children since 1994. "With that work, we've been looking at a whole range of issues from birth through to late adolescence," says Willms. "We want to know more about literacy skills and when and how they emerge. We're particularly interested in what we call the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. The first four years of school are really critical to how children do afterwards." The research further examines children's and adolescents' proneness to risky behaviour including smoking, drinking and drug use. In terms

of policy development, CRISP is interested in prevention and intervention of risk behaviours, and innovation in school system structures to promote better childhood and adolescent development.

## **Small school, big research**

Willms came from a 13-year teaching career at the University of British Columbia to take the chair position with CRISP at UNB Fredericton. Though smaller in size than most research-heavy institutions, UNB is a national comprehensive university with an impressive array of faculty and staff. "We have really outstanding staff here," says Willms. "They're extremely dedicated and hardworking." The multidisciplinary nature of a nationally comprehensive university is beneficial to the work he does with CRISP. "We have people who specialize in health outcomes, mental health outcomes and academic achievement. We have very strong orientation towards quantitative work, working with large-scale databases, national and international. More recently, we've been developing our own assessment tools. It's very multidisciplinary."