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Fall 2016

The official magazine for the College of Alberta School Superintendents



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#1200, 9925 – 109 Street  
Edmonton AB T5K 2J8  
Phone: (780) 451-7126  
Fax: (780) 482-5659

Email: Executive.Director@cass.ab.ca  
www.cass.ab.ca

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**Publications Agreement  
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**President & CEO**  
Jack Andress

**Operations Manager**  
Shoshana Weinberg  
sweinberg@matrixgroupinc.net

**Publishers**  
Peter Schulz, Jessica Potter

**Editor-in-Chief**  
Shannon Savory  
ssavory@matrixgroupinc.net

**Editor**  
Alexandra Walld  
awalld@matrixgroupinc.net

**Finance/Administration**  
Pat Andress, Nathan Redekop,  
Lloyd Weinberg  
accounting@matrixgroupinc.net

**Director of Circulation & Distribution**  
Lloyd Weinberg  
distribution@matrixgroupinc.net

**Sales Manager**  
Neil Gottfred

**Matrix Group Publishing Inc.**  
**Account Executives**  
Bonnie Petrovsky, Brian MacIntyre,  
Brittany Haw, Colleen Bell, Dakota  
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Kuzie, Rob Gibson, Stephanie Chisholm,  
Thomas Watson

**Advertising Design**  
James Robinson

**Layout & Design**  
Cody Chomiak

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# Message from the Minister of Education

The Honourable David Eggen

**W**ith the heat of summer fading and the crisp autumn air of fall rolling in, the new school year has begun. It's a time for renewed excitement as well as reflection. Some of Alberta's students, teachers and school administrators returned to schools they have not seen since their sudden evacuation back in May. The wildfires that raged through Fort McMurray and parts of northern Alberta were unprecedented in their devastation. I would like to thank the various school boards that stepped up to support evacuees, and continue to provide affected students with a quality education. Witnessing Albertans come together as they did made me proud of our province's strength of community.

Our government is working hard to ensure our students are given the tools they need to succeed in their future careers. A primary focus of this work will be in a new curriculum initiative that will span six years and be undertaken simultaneously in six subject areas: Arts, Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, Science, and Wellness. We owe this to our students and we know Albertans support our efforts. We will be turning to many of you for help as we launch a major consultation on this work in the form of both face-to-face meetings being held across the province, as well as an online survey that all Albertans will be invited to take.

With Alberta's job market continuing to diversify, exciting new programs, such as Career and Technology Foundations (CTF), will be offered starting this fall. Students in Grades 5 through 9 will have the option of taking part in this hands-on, engaging and innovative experience, as they learn the necessary skills to address real-world problems by creating a product, performance or service.

By exploring their interests and learning from industry professionals, students can better understand their career options before entering high school. The Career and Technology Studies program provides opportunities for high school students to develop their skills and learn how to apply them in their daily lives as they prepare to enter the workforce. These pathways will help students work toward career goals, whether they enter post-secondary, take apprenticeship training or move directly into the workforce.

Improving the education that Alberta's students receive is not our only concern. Alberta Education is committed to enhancing the health of all students. The Government of Alberta has committed to encouraging schools to adopt a comprehensive school health approach by educating their students about physical activity, healthy eating and positive mental health. Programs such as Ever Active Schools and the Alberta Healthy School Community Wellness Fund are invaluable supports for schools in this continued effort.

Education is one of the best ways to ensure a bright future for our children. Ensuring they have teachers and administrators who encourage and support them as they continue their journey is essential. It is important to celebrate and respect the differences of all our students, as every learner has unique needs. As leaders within our education system, I encourage all of you to champion our goal of making every student feel engaged and included. Students who are unmotivated and do not feel accepted in their learning environments are more likely to suffer from mental illness, and are less likely to have meaningful connections with friends and family or be involved in extracurricular activities. Having all children learn together teaches them important values and lays the foundation

for inclusive communities and workspaces. Each student is unique, and their experience will be different than that of their classmates. Inclusive education embraces diversity and reduces barriers in learning environments. All of Alberta's students should have equitable opportunities and feel safe within their schools.

Improving our provincial curriculum, offering alternative education and guaranteeing safe and caring spaces for all students ultimately comes back to our common goal: providing Alberta's children with the knowledge and skills they will need for future success in a diversified economy. During this new school year, I hope you take on the challenge of developing yourself professionally and continuing your own learning journey.

Thank you for the work you do. I look forward to the new school year and furthering our shared commitment to Alberta's K to 12 students. ■



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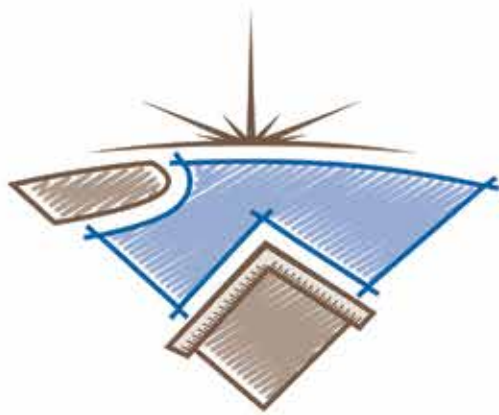
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# Message from the President

Colleen Symyrozum-Watt | College of Alberta School Superintendents

This issue's theme of "Promising Practices for Inclusive Education" struck a chord with system leaders across Alberta. The call for articles on this topic generated more than 16 responses—the most ever on a selected topic. As a result of your support, interest and excitement, we have decided to devote two editions of *The CASS Connection* to this topic.

As leaders we acknowledge that education evolves as society evolves. This is not the case when it comes to inclusive education. On this front, schools are leading the way, championing the belief that all students deserve to have their education needs met so that all students gain the knowledge, skills and attitudes they require to lead successful lives.

Like all good revolutionaries, we are searching for new and better ways of doing and being. For me, a change in attitudes will be key to our success. The premise that everyone belongs with everyone else is a relatively new one that is emerging as a new standard within our lifetimes.

The 1994 Salamanca Statement (UNESCO) marked a pivotal point in the world's recognition of this moral imperative: "Inclusive education implies that children and youth with special educational needs should be included in the educational arrangements made for the majority of children...Inclusive schools must recognize and respond to the diverse needs of students, accommodation of both different styles and rates of learning, and ensuring quality education to all through appropriate curricula, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, resource use and partnership with their communities." (*The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education*, Salamanca, Spain, 1994).

As you wrote in your submissions, the work of inclusion is not for the faint of a heart.

And while you acknowledged how hard the work is, you are incredibly adamant that this is valuable and meaningful work as we ensure all students' needs are met in our classrooms.

Margaret Wheatley writes in *Turning to One Another*, "There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about." Our educational community clearly cares about responding to the needs of diverse students in our schools.

When I started teaching, special needs students were assigned to Opportunity Rooms; segregated spaces where students with special needs would spend most of their day. Later, I was privileged to be part of initiatives to integrate these students into regular classrooms.

While tearing down the physical walls that separated these students from others was difficult and took courage, truly integrating our special needs students into our classrooms is an even greater struggle. In 2016, we challenge ourselves to create inclusive classrooms where we foster respect for diversity and where every child feels like they belong.

In your submissions to this magazine, you are candid about how hard it is to serve students

who come to classrooms with a spectrum of needs; how this places demands on teachers that are often beyond their foundational training and skill sets; and again you are equally adamant of the necessity of doing this work. You generously share your hard-won victories so that we can all learn from each other. Together, our passion is issuing into action toward learning for all—whatever it takes.

CASS' work with Alberta Education's Advisory Committee for Building an Inclusive Education system further supports our goal. Dr. Dianne McConnell represents us at this provincial table, ably supported by a CASS Advisory Committee of 14 CASS members from across the province.

The provincial Advisory Committee's mandate is to identify gaps and opportunities to implementing an inclusive education system; and more importantly, it provides advice and strategies so that we can improve on this front.

In June, Dr. McConnell presented the Advisory Committee's four recommendations to the CASS Board of Directors for consideration:

- Reiterate the importance of a Standard for Inclusive Education;

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- Clarify, from an educational perspective, the desired outcomes for the Regional Collaborative Service Delivery Model;
- Consider hosting an inclusive education symposium with Alberta Education; and
- Explore the accepted practice of using the Early Years Evaluation (EYE).

As I write this message, your CASS Board of Directors is developing a response to these recommendations.

The work we have done on inclusive education via this CASS Advisory Committee, and as reported in our magazine, is just one example of the power and potential of CASS. The promising practices which we have developed are borne of leadership. Education leaders across this province have identified what they “care about” and are transforming school environments. This revolution is supported by growing competencies because of the depth of knowledge, research and expertise of those

among us. Connections among us and between us are providing support, momentum and innovation. As I consider the future, I know that if we draw on these capacities, competencies and connections, we have the potential to impact every classroom and by extension, ALL students.

Thank you to our contributors. By sharing your stories, you are giving us the courage and the knowledge to transform promising practice into realities for our students. ■

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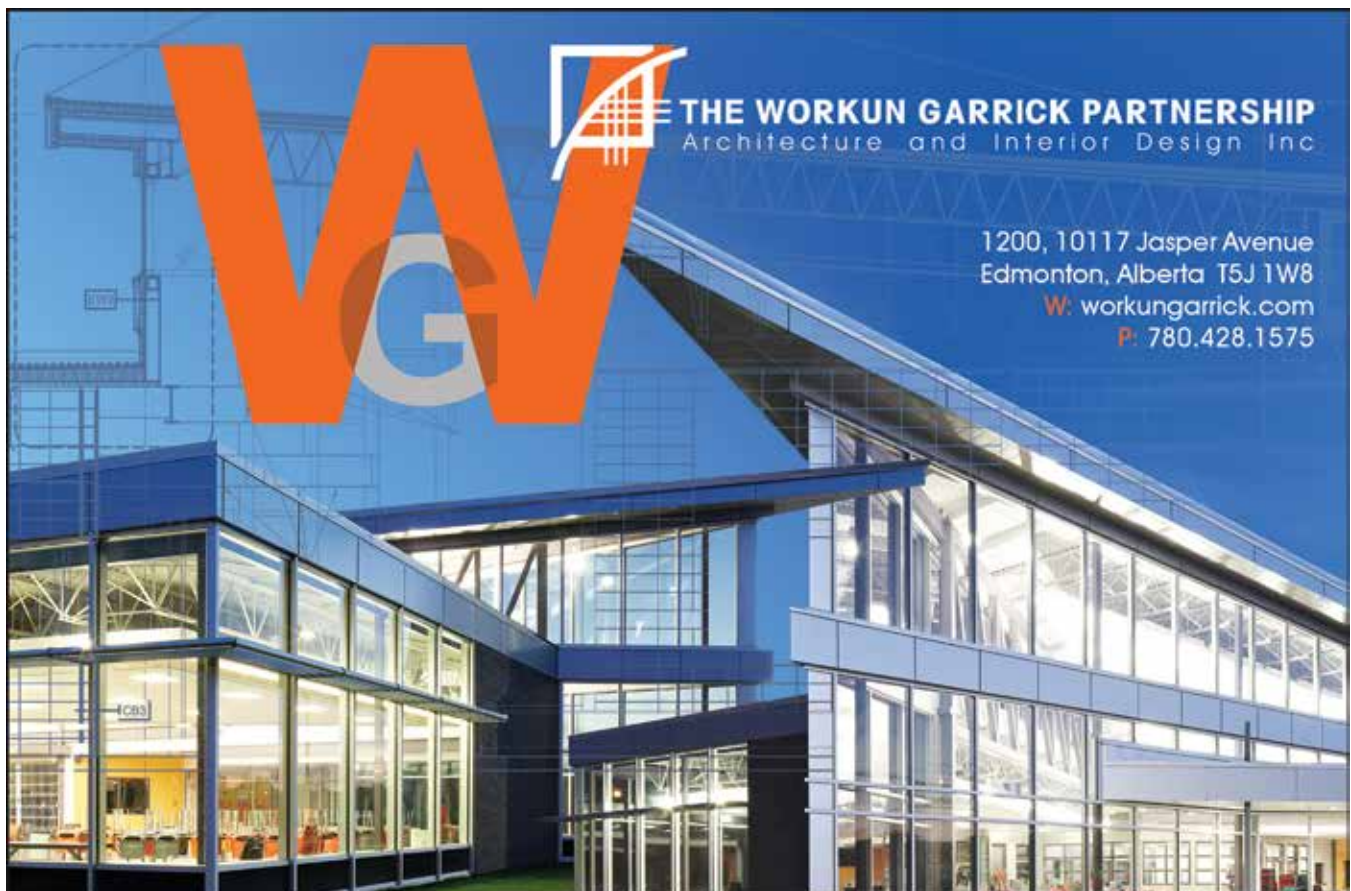
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# Message from the Executive Director

Barry Litun | College of Alberta School Superintendents

When the CASS Board of Directors determined the theme for the Fall 2016 edition of *The CASS Connection* would be “Leadership Learning: Promising Practices for Inclusive Education,” it quickly became clear the theme resonated with CASS members.

There was an overwhelming response to the Call for Article Proposals. In fact, the response was so strong the Board of Directors decided that the theme would be carried for two editions, Fall 2016 and Spring 2017.

The response mirrored what occurred in April 2014 when CASS was invited by Alberta Education to have a representative serve on the Advisory Committee for Building an Inclusive Education System. Typically, a call for expressions of interest to serve as a CASS representative on a provincial committee results in three to five responses. This call resulted in nearly 20 expressions of interest! When Dr. Dianne McConnell was identified by the Board of Directors as the CASS representative, the other applicants were asked if they would consider participating in a CASS Advisory Committee in order to provide feedback and recommendations for Dianne to take to the provincial meeting.

There was an almost unanimous positive response in favour of doing so, and over the past two years more than 20 CASS members, some who joined the Advisory Committee after it was formed, have been dedicated to ensuring CASS has had a strong, representative voice at the provincial meetings. They committed to meeting in person and by teleconference over the past two years, and their collaborative efforts have enabled CASS, as represented by Dr. McConnell, to have a major influence on the development

I admit that at the time I questioned some of the demands and practices of Shelley’s parents. I have had the opportunity, however, to reflect on those days through the lens of a comment by former Deputy Minister Dr. LeRoy Sloan, who said at a professional learning event, “As a parent, is there anything you would not do if you felt the life of your child was in danger?”

of the *Inclusive Education Policy Framework*<sup>1</sup>, anticipated to be published in Winter 2016.

In addition, the CASS Board of Directors has accepted the recommendation of the Advisory Committee for development of an Inclusive Education Standard, and will strongly encourage the Ministry to develop and officially endorse a Standard for Inclusion as a Ministerial Order.

At public meetings to review the draft Policy Framework, Inclusive Education was identified as “a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance of, and belonging for, all children and students. (It) reduces barriers to participation and

learning so that each and every student is a successful learner.”<sup>1</sup>

As I reflect upon the previous statement, I marvel at how far the public education system travelled in my life time with respect to inclusive education. I share the following two anecdotal stories to provide evidence to my belief.

My home town is Chipman, Alberta, a small village of fewer than 300 residents located 70 kilometres east of Edmonton. While attending elementary school I had a friend, Myles, who was diagnosed with Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy. Through Grades 4 and 5, as his physical limitations increased, Myles’



classmates and I likely never thought much about his medical condition; we just knew that there were certain things he couldn't participate in. When Myles lost the ability to walk and was confined to a wheel chair, with a suddenness that was beyond our maturity at the time, Myles lost the opportunity to attend school in his home town. He became a resident student at Glenrose Hospital in Edmonton, and save for a few visits to Edmonton, I never saw him much prior to his passing away just prior to his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

At the time, this story was accepted practice throughout public education; accommodating students with physical or cognitive challenges was something that was not expected, let alone embraced.

In Alberta, the change to that way of thinking began, ironically, in my hometown of Chipman and is documented as the Carriere case<sup>2</sup>. The Carriere family moved into Chipman when I was in Grade 9. The oldest son was in my grade and he had an infant sister, Shelley, who had Cerebral Palsy. Her parents would not accept that their daughter

could not attend the public school where she lived, and their challenge of that thinking directly to the Minister of Education resulted in the K to 9 school in Chipman and her high school in Lamont having to undergo facility and pedagogical changes in order to accommodate Shelley. I can speak with some authority on this particular situation as I was the Vice Principal of Lamont High School when Shelley completed her schooling.

I admit that at the time I questioned some of the demands and practices of Shelley's parents. I have had the opportunity, however, to reflect on those days through the lens of a comment by former Deputy Minister Dr. LeRoy Sloan, who said at a professional learning event, "As a parent, is there anything you would not do if you felt the life of your child was in danger?"

The result of the challenging of "the system" by the Carriere family and others is the evolution of education in our province so that we have reached, or are approaching a time where there is "universal acceptance of, and belonging for, all children and students."

I want to thank all the writers who have contributed to this edition of *The CASS Connection*. Your stories demonstrate how inclusive education can, and is successfully supporting all students.

Thank you as well to the sponsors that advertise in *The CASS Connection*. Your support enables us to publish the magazine, which is shared with all education partners in the province as well as all the parallel organizations of system leaders across Canada.

I conclude by welcoming new Deputy Minister Dr. Curtis Clarke. I am pleased that Dr. Clarke has accepted an invitation to speak with CASS members at the CASS Fall Conference in November. ■

## References

1. *Inclusive Education Policy Framework*. ASBA Issues Forum, April 2016. [www.asba.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/pif\\_inclusive\\_ed.pdf](http://www.asba.ab.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/pif_inclusive_ed.pdf)
2. *Chipman School Program: Shelley Carriere, County of Lamont # 30*. Alberta Education. Edmonton Regional Office. 1979.



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# The City of 100 Hellos:

## *Embracing and Supporting Diversity*



*By Kathleen Jensen, Grasslands Public Schools*

**G** rasslands Public School District is located in Southeastern Alberta along the straight section of the TransCanada Highway between Calgary and Medicine Hat. The road is flanked by prairie and farmland, dotted with oil wells and herds of cattle. This is the heart of agriculture and oil. The Eastern Irrigation District has made this an oasis in the middle of a prairie desert and it has also become an oasis for immigrants and refugees from around the world.

Brooks has been portrayed in a documentary as *The City of 100 Hellos*. This documentary, produced in 2011 by Brandy Y Productions, outlined the successes and struggles in our community. It speaks of the growing pains and the joys of a community that is changing and learning.

With a meat-packing plant as a large employer in our community, we have a job market for people from around the world. Instant employment, even without English language skills, is a draw for foreign refugees and immigration from many countries.

In January of 2016, I was pleased to participate in an information series called “Supporting Every Student Learning” with the Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research. The session I was involved in was called “Supporting

Refugee Students, and it also featured Roxanne Felix-Mah of Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research; and Christine Oliver of the Calgary Board of Education. This article is an extension of that presentation.

As you walk into our local grocery stores or the Wal-mart Supercentre, it is often the women who capture attention as the variety of their clothing and their head coverings identify their different cultures. As you enter, you will be greeted by a smiling woman wearing a hijab and the traditional clothing of the Somalian culture. As you move forward into the produce section, you will see Hutterite women with polka dot head scarves, a woman with a black kerchief from the old order Mennonite culture, a woman wearing brightly coloured head coverings from African countries, and women in the traditional clothing from Pakistan and India. You will hear a multitude of languages and a real feeling of a traditional market setting.

If you walk through Brooks Composite High School, you see the same diversity in the student population and the many flags in the student commons. You will see posters and bulletin boards showing events for Inter-Christian Varsity Fellowship, the gay-straight alliance called SMYLE, spirit council, sports, band, drama and

Student leaders  
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art. You will see Settlement Workers in Schools counsellors and youth workers from Brooks and County Immigration Services. You will see students with significant learning, physical and medical needs. If you walk through Bassano School, you will see a school rich in First Nations culture, with 75 students from the Siksika Nation. If you walk through our Alcoma and Rolling Hills schools, you will see many students



who are from Low German Mennonite backgrounds.

Within a true public school system, all students who walk through the doors of our schools are welcomed into a caring, respectful and safe learning environment. They are accepted and valued for who they are, and they are wonderful young examples of a rich democracy in action.

Some of our schools are at 25 to 30 per cent English language learners. Some of our urban schools have an eight to 10 per cent population of refugees; some of these children have had little to no schooling, even in their first language.

With a total population of 3,700 students in our district, it is very interesting to visit our urban schools to experience the rich mix of our student demographic, which includes Ethiopian, Sudanese, Somali, Nigerian, Liberian, Congolese, Chinese, Indian, Afghani, Iraqi, Pakistani, Filipino, Colombian and Mexican. They are Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Buddhist. Their parents come with no education, and they come with university degrees. They come from refugee camps, cities and farms. They come from countries at war and some of the stories that they tell are horrific and heartbreaking.

Our community and our school district have evolved together to best support our population. We often look at our system as not just Kindergarten to Grade 12, but birth to 20. We know that as a system we must look at both ends of the spectrum to best enhance early learning, high school completion and preparation for the adult world. If we don't provide early intervention or

we fail to finish the high school process, we know our students will be at a disadvantage.

As a school district, our goal has always been to work together with the community to connect them with our school. We find that as soon as we link and partner with agencies we accomplish a great deal with greater understanding of each other's roles. There is no magic or perfect program, but rather a linking of services to build on each other's strengths. The earlier we intervene and the longer we have our students, the more successful and connected they will be.

We work together with Child and Family Services on a Parents as Teachers program that supports parents in the home with home visits. Parents are connected to other agencies and get support for their children as soon as they are born.

Our students are supported and connected in schools, not only for language acquisition, but also the social supports that promote positive mental health strategies. We have a wonderful Mental Health Capacity Building Project that supports our families and our schools. If a need is identified, the team works to connect and find a solution and support.

We know some of our families suffer financially. If we know a student would benefit from a sports team, we co-ordinate with Canadian Tire's Jumpstart program to get them involved without a cost to their family. The City of Brooks is a wonderful partner in offering free leisure passes to all of our junior high students.

Our Mental Health Capacity Building Project has co-ordinated healthy lunch programs in all our city schools. No questions asked, any

student who is hungry eats and there is no stigma to accessing food. It is a no-fuss system run completely by donations and staff at the school.

One of the hardest things for a school is to receive students who are 16 to 18 years old when they first enter our system. We know the longer we have them, the more successful they are. Students who have been with us for five or more years will do very well academically and will go on to post-secondary school.

Courses are put into place to address language acquisition and they are integrated into as many mainstream courses as possible. Some of these students work a 40 hour week at the plant and still regularly attend school. They are determined to persist until they pass English 30-2 and receive their high school diplomas. These graduation ceremonies are wonderful celebrations of some very long journeys!

It has been commented that our schools are very peaceful places. Our students are used to diversity and they have been taught the caring values of accepting people for who they are and the richness they bring to our school communities. ■

*Kathleen Jensen is the Assistant Superintendent of Grasslands Public Schools. She was born and raised on a farm close to Brooks, Alberta and has spent most of her career in Grasslands as a teacher, principal and system leader.*

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# Walking Together Towards Inclusive Education



*Dr. Dianne McConnell and Leah Andrews, Parkland School Division*

**P**arkland School Division's (PSD) Board of Trustees, along with Superintendent Tim Monds, have established an ultimate goal of success and well-being for all students along with a mission to prepare, engage and inspire them to be their best in a quickly changing global community.

Foundational to this is creating quality learning experiences within a culture of wellness and inclusion. We, like most jurisdictions in Alberta, started the journey of creating an inclusive educational system many years ago. In the beginning, we read about and went to conferences on universal design for learning, read and reread foundational documents like *Setting the Direction* and connected with other jurisdictional leaders across the province. As we synthesized our learning, we articulated a common vision and identified expectations to create a

common understanding of what we were trying to achieve.

We expect to see all students:

- Be meaningfully linked to the Program of Study;
- Have the supports and services they need to access educational programs;
- Be safe and healthy; and
- Feel they are welcomed and they contribute.

These expectations continue to guide the decisions we make on a day-to-day basis. However, some people still ask, "What does inclusion really mean? How do we do it? How do we know if we're doing it right?" These questions tell us we still have work to do.

Our division has created a culture where student success within inclusive environments is closely linked to well-being and the development of social-emotional assets that

build resiliency. As a result, we've implemented an initiative focused on resiliency and hired a coordinator. We began to work on the implementation of comprehensive school health. Over the years, we have learned that wellness for both students and staff is foundational to developing a school culture that can deliver on our goal of student success within inclusive environments.

We have learned that inclusion is not just something you do, but also a feeling that is created; a feeling where everyone belongs, feels supported and believes they contribute to the community in a meaningful way. So, as our next step in the journey, we realized that in order for us to deliver on our agenda, we needed to be intentional about knowing thyself and knowing thy student. We asked ourselves, "What does this look like in PSD?"

## Know thyself

Healthy adults nurture healthy students. Our central nervous systems are made up of energy. When we get nervous, anxious or feel inadequate, we begin to get activated and then that energy can show up in ways that are not always healthy; we try to do more, we shut down and fear trying something new, or we begin to doubt ourselves.

When we are activated and we come in contact with students who are activated, it can become uncomfortable and make it difficult for us to make sense of what it is we are trying to accomplish. **Let's slow down.** If we really do believe we don't need to have all of the answers right now, we can lean into that discomfort instead of running away from it. When we take time to know ourselves and learn to understand why we are responding in certain ways, we can be vulnerable in working with our students, families and colleagues to help us figure out our next steps.

To support our staff to better understand themselves, we offer professional learning opportunities that focus on wellness and getting to know thyself. We host workshops with a

focus on yoga, mindfulness, physical literacy, walking groups and personal retreats. To model and nurture wellness among our leaders, we take time during administrative meetings to embrace a few mindful moments, engage in physical movement and have reflective conversations with our colleagues.

As an organization, we intentionally design space and opportunities for people to learn, share, grow, heal and connect. Adults who are well can build and cultivate environments where everyone feels like they belong and have contributions to make to the community. We need to create spaces where people can come together to identify and experience a sense of inclusion.

## Know thy student

In order for us to remove barriers to learning and improve environments for each of our students, we need to really understand them. We need to know their back stories, hopes, dreams, passions and strengths. We need to be able to look at each one of our students and say, "I see you; I see you and you are enough just the way you are." In the wisdom of Brené

Brown, we want students to belong and not just fit in. Embracing diversity means we see it as a strength that enriches us and helps us grow as individuals. As a result, we are more able to design programs where students are happy, healthy and successful, receiving the right supports and services so they can achieve the outcomes from the Programs of Study.

In PSD, teachers use a variety of tools to help them see their students. In Kindergarten to Grade 9, we use a classroom profile tool where teachers identify the degree to which students are engaged in different aspects of education such as literacy, numeracy, transitions and physical literacy. Some teachers send home interview questions for parents such as, "Are there holidays you don't celebrate and how would you like me to address these in the classroom?" Teachers use academic assessments as well as student interest inventories to get to know their students. Some even go to their students' community sports games.

One school used a "fish out of water" activity to identify students who they believe are not connected to at least two adults in the school. Then, every staff member took

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on one or two of those students and made it their mission to really get to know and build a connection with those students throughout the school year. Building relationships is important to us and we continually look for additional ways to get to know students in more ways than just academics.

In educator Shelley Moore's video on transforming inclusive education, she helps us to see that when we design learning for those students on the edges of our classroom—for our students with the most unique and sometimes challenging needs—then we are more likely to make learning accessible for all. In this process, we are truly designing an inclusive environment.

In her Ted Talk, *Under the Table*, Moore also talks about the importance of presuming competence for all of our learners. Sometimes we make assumptions about what students can and can't do, and these assumptions can and will influence the design of our learning environments. When we presume competence and believe in our hearts that there are different ways of knowing and different ways of demonstrating learning, then we are open

to all of the possibilities that are available to us and our students.

When we lean in, when we get curious and walk beside our students to get to know them in deep and authentic ways, we *see* them and embrace them for all they are and, thereby, will be better able to identify what specific supports and services our students may need.

### The union

As our wellness coordinator said about embracing stillness, "Let's imagine that time could be stopped just long enough so that we could all hold onto and bottle up the sense of well-being that we experience when we're doing exactly what we love. If we had the ability to maintain a sense of well-being in everything that we do and extend that feeling to all those with whom we come in contact, we would certainly ensure that all students were experiencing the division's ultimate goal of student success and well-being."

Perhaps, when we really know our students, know ourselves and are well, we may be better able to respond to the diverse needs in all of our classrooms. We will no longer need to

ask, "What is inclusion?" and "How do we do it?" Wellness and inclusion are inseparable. We cannot truly build inclusive environments without focusing on wellness and quality learning. We need to take the time to get to know ourselves and our students to do this well.

We work in a complex human system and, as such, embracing a collaborative approach to problem solving is helping us move further along with inclusion. Let's continue to make inclusion, wellness and quality learning a priority and take action based on what we know about ourselves and our students. Let's lean further into the discomfort and learn from both what worked and what didn't work. Let's walk together. ■

*Dr. McConnell brings over 25 years of experience as a lifelong educational leader, registered psychologist and teacher. She's been an Associate Superintendent since 2013 with a focus on Inclusion and Early Childhood Development. Leah Andrews has been PSD's Director, Learning Supports since 2011 serving teachers and students in the areas of Curriculum, Assessment, Student Services and Inclusion.*

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# Leadership for Achieving Quality Inclusion

By Dr. Brenda Sautner, Fort McMurray Public School District

Inclusive education is an important policy in public education. Since 1992, inclusion has been constantly reviewed in Alberta. Numerous reports and recommendations illustrate the challenges in implementing the policy—which was designed by government—in schools and districts. This article discusses what public school staff in Alberta say and do to achieve quality inclusion for all their students.<sup>1</sup>

An inclusive school is not just about the placement of students in regular classrooms or a value-based approach based on providing students with a sense of belonging. The quality of inclusion is based on results of the process of school improvement efforts. District and school leadership play a significant role.

Staff promote inclusion using the vision of the school or district. The vision statement is the school's statement of purpose or the common motto. For example, in Fort McMurray Public School District, the vision is to "Inspire and engage students for life-long learning." The motto is "Doing what is best for kids." It is important that *every* staff and leader believes in and models the school or district vision, and that all students are respectfully included. The strength of the school's vision increases when it achieves success for *every* student, including English language learners and students at risk of failing.

Collaborative teamwork is key. A collaborative school culture has a laser-like focus on the vision. Inclusion is enhanced when staff make decisions collectively and achieve consensus, especially on matters of school-wide concern. When provided opportunities to collaborate, staff already have much of the expertise. School leaders use staff's collective knowledge and, when problems arise, ensure achieving the school's vision remains central.

Surowiecki's<sup>2</sup> research on the wisdom of crowds found that if you put together a diverse group of people and ask them to make decisions that affect them, that group's decision will be intellectually superior to any one individual's, no matter how smart or well informed that individual is. The staff's collective expertise becomes the most important asset to the school and district's quality of inclusion.

The staff's capacity and skills to strengthen inclusion develops by working together. The purpose of professional learning communities (PLCs) is to achieve the vision and increase

achievement. PLCs focus on outcomes expected and results achieved, then align their practices and supports. Benefits of PLCs include solving mutual problems, sharing ideas, developing trust and respecting diverse opinions. They also provide teachers access to a larger pool of expertise, ideas, methods and materials.

Outcomes of inclusive programming are measured. Information is collected from a variety of sources and used as evidence to evaluate school improvement efforts. Staff measure the increased presence, participation and achievement of students with special needs.<sup>3</sup> Data includes attendance rates, increased participation in regular classrooms, aggregated number goals achieved on all individualized program plans, number of students transitioning from severe to moderate or mild levels, charting academic ability or social skills over the year(s), number of individually assigned assistants re-assigned to classrooms as a result of increased student independence and the reduction of specialized programs over time.

When focused on results, staff increase learning, identify effective instructional practices and enhance inclusive practices. Staff assess and report student performance within the framework of what is expected of all students. The culture of holding low expectations of some students is challenged by leaders and staff encourage every student to reach high expectations. Consensus is achieved on three key questions:

1. What do we want the student to know and be able to do? For example, achieve provincial learner outcomes or district outcomes for specialized programs.
2. How will we know if and when each student has acquired the knowledge and skills expected? We could look at results of classroom and academic assessments.
3. How will we respond to improve teaching and increase learning? Will we differentiate instruction, social skills instruction or use another method?

Inclusion strengthens students' social, emotional, behaviour and intellectual





competencies. This is achieved by staff and student relationships, setting clear standards for behaviour, building student self-efficacy and increasing opportunities for all students to be engaged learners.

Staff view these problems as challenges, not excuses, to achieving the school's vision for every student. Alberta Education's *Framework for Student Learning: Competencies for Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit*<sup>4</sup> describes the competencies required of *all* students in Alberta. Developing these student competencies creates a truly inclusive education system and ensures the future success for every student in Alberta.

The ability to achieve an inclusive school comes when the vision is translated into action through staff collaborating, building capacity and owning the process for their school. Distributing leadership is what captures the knowledge and skill of staff to collectively achieve their vision. Elmore<sup>5</sup> urges school leaders to focus on instructional improvement then define everything else around it. This focus includes increasing the achievement of students with special educational needs as a result of supports, adaptations or modifications provided.

Creating quality inclusion is not easy and there is no simple recipe. Each school has to develop its own way forward. Improvement is developed from the inside out. The Alberta *Framework for School System Success*<sup>6</sup> is a guide that improves system success. It is designed to funnel evidence-informed school system leadership practices in one direction to improve student learning. The framework guides the school improvement process. When used with all schools in a district, it improves that achievement on a district-wide basis.

Sustaining inclusive programming is the responsibility of everyone, including the school and district leaders. If the vision does not apply to some students or a negative view of some students is condoned, this is inconsistent with the vision. The use of "all" students becomes rhetoric. When all students are included, building staff's capacity makes it possible for all students to benefit from teaching strategies.

When problems arise outside their expertise, the solution requires leaders to mobilize staff to solve the problems. This is an adaptive challenge. According to Fullan<sup>7</sup>, adaptive challenges have four components:

1. The challenge creates a gap between reality and vision;
2. It demands a response outside the expertise of staff;
3. Narrowing the gap requires new learning; and
4. The people with the problem are responsible for the solution.

Achieving quality with inclusive education is an adaptive challenge and inclusive schools focus on continuous school improvement. What staff say and do in inclusive schools, individually and collectively, is based on one vision that is reflected in staff collaboration with a focus on results. In addition, quality inclusion evolves when staff collaboratively

own the process for including every student. Ultimately, the quality is a result of distributing leadership, adapting to challenges and being united in achieving the school or district's vision for all students. ■

*Dr. Brenda Sautner is an associate superintendent for Fort McMurray Public School District. Sautner obtained her doctorate of philosophy in educational administration and leadership from the University of Alberta. She was awarded the national Fellowship Award from the Canadian Association for the Practical Study of Law in Education for her research and policy analysis supporting inclusive and safe and caring schools.*

## Resources

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# All In for Youth: Moving the Needle on High School Completion

By Craig Foley, All In for Youth

**A**lberta has an outstanding education system that supports children and youth to become engaged and contributing citizens. Yet, as educators, our work is not done when more than one in four youth do not complete high school on time. Students in Alberta are faced with increasingly complex social challenges that are barriers to high school completion. This includes mental health and addiction issues, poverty and social exclusion.

Educators are responding to the complexity boldly by experimenting with new approaches that are more student-centred, flexible and engaged with community resources. An exciting example of a collaboration between schools and community that is moving the needle on high school completion in Calgary, Alberta, is All In for Youth (AIFY). It's an initiative that unites educators with partners across corporate, government and not-for-profit sectors to embed community resources into schools in innovative and sustainable ways.

The organization is dedicated to building a stronger culture of care in Calgary's high schools by recognizing the individualized needs of youth—whether academic, social or financial—and responding with appropriate support when and where they need it. Programs are offered in 21 Calgary high schools by AIFY. The programs:

1. Connect youth to positive adults in the community;
2. Remove financial and other barriers to academic success; and
3. Link youth to further education and career options that fit their skills and interests.

Since 2012, AIFY has made more than 6,000 positive adult-youth connections in Calgary schools. Key program offerings are shown in Table 1.

## What it takes to “move the needle”

Moving the needle on complex issues like school completion is beyond the capability of

one organization or even a traditional collaboration. True social impact takes courage, innovation and the collective commitment of all sectors. As a movement of individuals, institutions, corporations and community organizations, AIFY is committed to increasing high school completion rates by connecting youth to positive adults who provide support and resources for success.

United Way of Calgary and Area acts as the backbone and main funder for AIFY. Knowing traditional cross-sector collaborations can take years to become fully-functional, AIFY partners committed to being active in high schools in the organization's first year of formation. Taking an action-model approach, partners co-designed prototype projects based on promising practices for working with youth. The prototypes were tested in a limited number of schools to gauge success and to be refined before launching on a larger scale. Both Calgary school districts were key partners in this work. Provincially, AIFY aligns closely with Alberta Education's Moving Forward with High School Redesign initiative, in particular the pillars around meaningful relationships and collaboration with community.

## Success Coaches: The door is never closed

The Success Coach program is central to AIFY's impact. Administered by the Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary onsite at AIFY schools, Success Coaches take a strengths-based and trauma-informed approach to support students in identifying and addressing barriers that prevent them from completing high school.

During the 2015 to 2016 school year, Success Coaches worked with 1,251 students in 12 schools, providing either one-time support for immediate challenges or intensive, ongoing support to overcome more entrenched barriers

such as poverty, mental health issues or lack of family support.

Results show Success Coaches are effectively keeping vulnerable youth in school and supporting them in ways that help them graduate. Of 268 students working with Success Coaches in the spring of 2015, 94 were due to graduate in June and 77 per cent of them did graduate or continued their studies the following year. Of the remaining 174 in lower grades, 95 per cent were still in school in June 2016. The sidebar on page 23 shows the major barriers faced by students working with Success Coaches, with examples of how they were supported as well as the ultimate outcomes.

## What can your school district do?

No matter the size or location of the school district, there are a number of vital components that can be considered part of a high school completion strategy:

- Building a flexible and adaptable culture that focuses on the individual needs of students;
- Ensuring high schools have exit strategies for students who leave school prior to completion;
- Using Success Coaches in each high school to support students and connect them with local community resources and services;
- Deploying a staff position focusing on developing and maintaining partnerships between schools and community supports;
- Developing volunteer opportunities focused on positive adult relationships such as mentoring, tutoring and career talks; and
- Creating partnerships with local agencies, service groups, corporations and businesses to collaborate across sectors.

As lessons are learned and strategies improved, AIFY is excited to see how the needle





will continue to move to improve high school completion in Calgary and Alberta. For more information, go to [allinfor youth.com](http://allinfor youth.com). ■

*Craig Foley has been the Director of All In for Youth for United Way of Calgary and Area since June 2014. Foley recently retired from the Calgary Catholic School District as Superintendent of Human Resources. He was the President of the College of Alberta School Superintendents from 2012 to 2013.*

## TOP BARRIERS AND HOW SUCCESS COACHES SUPPORT AND MAKE AN IMPACT

### Financial Hardship

Success Coaches refer students to resources offering **financial assistance**, such as those offered by Burns Memorial Fund.

Realizing that many students were coming to school hungry, Success Coaches began to offer a food program. Last semester, **51,516 snacks** were provided at schools and **52 hampers** were distributed to families that need them.

In addition to connecting youth to valuable community supports, Success Coaches **referred 155 students** to other All In for Youth programs.

### Mental Health / Addictions Issues

Students with mental health barriers are connected to Alberta Health Services, community services and in-school support. Some youth were supported to set up counseling appointments, were transported to those appointments, and **had their fees paid** through our Barrier Removal Fund.

Eighty-one per cent of students reported feeling they have the tools and skills they need to deal with any future problems that may arise in school.

### Lack of Positive Adult Role Models

More than 60 per cent of students working with Success Coaches named a lack of positive adults in their lives as a key barrier to their success at school.

After working with a Success Coach, 94 per cent of students felt they had one or more positive connections to an adult in their school.



**all in for youth**  
United for school completion.

**Table 1**

Program		Lead Partners
Barrier Removal Funds	AIFY schools receive \$5,000 per year to support students with removing financial barriers (transportation, school supplies, food, clothing, etc.)	United Way of Calgary and Area
Career Talks	Thirty-minute informal conversations in small groups that help students discover a variety of careers (including the trades). Volunteers share personal stories and the paths that led to their respective professions.	The City of Calgary Youth Employment Centre
Detour	An alternative route to high school completion for students who are not successful within a traditional high school program or who are returning after taking time away from school.	Bow Valley College, Burns Memorial Fund, Boys & Girls Clubs of Calgary
Math Tutoring	After school math tutoring at five YMCA locations. Students receive snacks, two hours of free tutoring, mentorship and a pass to the YMCA for regular attendance.	YMCA Calgary
mPower Mentoring	Mentors empower youth to identify strengths, explore passions and achieve goals as they journey towards adulthood.	Big Brothers Big Sisters
Success Coaches	Taking a strength-based and trauma-informed approach, coaches provide one-on-one support to address barriers preventing youth from completing school.	Boys and Girls Clubs of Calgary



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# Improving Literacy Outcomes for All Students



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Reading aloud during family literacy night.

*“In Alberta, inclusive education, is a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance of, and belonging of all students. It is a value-based approach to accepting responsibility for all students.”*

By Donna Barrett, Northland School Division #61

Being inclusive requires that division leaders consider all students when designing and implementing initiatives. In 2012, Northland School Division launched an initiative to improve literacy outcomes for all students based on the belief that every student has the right to quality literacy instruction and if we achieve this, student outcomes would improve.

Northland School Division serves primarily First Nations and Métis students living in small rural and remote communities in Northern Alberta with each community having its own unique culture and history. Revitalization of indigenous languages and cultures was and continues to be an essential component of the initiative.

Engagement with staff, parents and the community is an important dimension of inclusive practice. In fact, ongoing broad-based support is critical to the success of any initiative. Members of Northland communities value education and its potential to support a positive future for their children and youth. However, the residue of residential schools can create barriers to initiatives that are not desired, understood or supported at the local level. As a result, at the beginning of the initiative, steps were taken to engage the community and to create

understanding of the importance of a division-wide focus on literacy.

School principals, key teachers and central instructional leadership staff created an understanding and built support to look systematically at how to improve literacy outcomes for students. Over time, there was general agreement among school and division leaders that a focus on literacy would be a key lever to improving academic success. This created the openness for a review of literacy practices by an external expert.

All schools were included in the review. The reviewer visited classrooms, spoke to teachers, principals, education assistants, parents, local school governance and community members. Ongoing feedback to, and involvement of, school principals during the process allowed the reviewer to highlight strengths and areas of need. These sessions also created venues for building a common knowledge base among school and central leaders about high yield practices for literacy development.

Regular feedback was also provided to the official trustee to build understanding, respond to questions and build support for the work ahead. Because we had taken the time to involve many stakeholders—particularly those

who would carry the weight of implementation in their school—we launched the program with a strong endorsement of the initial plan.

Building staff capacity to fully implement the literacy initiative has been a challenging yet key element in achieving high quality literacy instruction for every student. Schools and school staff are in different places in their capacity to fully implement the initiative. Teacher transition rates are high and provision of external supports is costly due to travel requirements. To attempt to address these challenges, a division literacy principal who reports directly to the superintendent, was assigned to oversee and guide implementation.

The division literacy principal and a very small group of pedagogical supervisors visit schools and work with school staff to assess strengths and needs related to literacy. Schools use this information to refine yearly literacy improvement plans. Central staff use the information to prioritize support and set priorities for professional development.

Classes in Northland School Division frequently include multiple grades and a diverse student population. A critical step in supporting implementation was the adoption of an inclusive classroom instructional framework



using evidence-based high yield literacy practices delivered in a workable structure that anticipated and responded to the range of learning needs and abilities in each classroom.

A balanced literacy approach using the Daily Five<sup>2</sup> structure was selected because it supported teachers to differentiate instruction and guide reading development by working intensively with small groups of students on particular strategies at differing levels. Educational assistants were trained to support teachers in using this model in the classroom. Native language teachers were provided professional development in the model.

Improving reading requires that students at every reading level and in every reading classroom have access to a wide range of engaging and culturally relevant reading materials. This created a significant financial challenge for the division. Over time and through the generous support of multi-year grants from Cenovus Energy, a wide range of resources have been purchased. Classroom libraries have been developed to ensure easy access to reading materials. A particular emphasis has been placed on acquiring internally validated materials that reflect indigenous perspectives.

Taking responsibility for all children requires teachers, principals and division leaders to have and act on data related to literacy growth and attainment for each student. A standard teacher administered classroom-based assessment is required to be used to inform instruction. Data from teacher assessments is collected centrally at three points in the school year. Following each data collection, principals and school-based literacy leads meet in small groups with the division literacy leads to review school, classroom and student progress. School-based and division leaders work collaboratively to understand the data, celebrate successes and adjust plans and support throughout the year using a continuous improvement model. Initial work has been started to develop benchmarks for Cree and Dene language programs.

So, how are we doing several years in? The good news is that due to sustained focus and hard work from many staff, we are seeing positive results. We have data on the progress of every student. Our most recent data indicates that as students move through elementary school, more of them are reading at grade level.

Going forward, the division will continue to focus on strengthening early literacy to give students the best possible start. Support for staff in the implementation of evidence-based literacy practices will continue. Schools will continue to host literacy celebrations for parents and community members to showcase student learning and highlight the importance of literacy. As well, division efforts to improve attendance, support cultural weaving and engage parents will all complement the focus on literacy. ■

*Donna Barrett Ed D. retired as Superintendent of Northland School Division #61 this past August, having served from 2010 to 2016. Prior to that, she was Assistant Superintendent at Edmonton Public Schools from 2001 to 2010.*

### Resources

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# Including Students with Complex Communication Needs

The sign for cohesion.

By Rob McGarva, Pembina Hills Public Schools

Students with Complex Communication Needs (CCN) present a huge challenge for inclusion in regular classrooms. Pembina Hills Public Schools (PHPS) has been focused on trying to address these demands for two reasons: first, to support these children, and second in the belief that if inclusive approaches can be developed for this group of students, it reinforces the idea that all students can be included. However, inclusive education is complicated and this article attempts to describe the factors that have led to success and the barriers that have limited progress.

The profiles of students with CCN range widely. The resulting speech, language and communication difficulties can lead to significant challenges in forming peer and adult relationships, and limitations in benefitting from the usual curriculum and classroom teaching strategies. Support for students with complex communication needs had traditionally been provided through periodic consultation visits from regional consulting services out of Edmonton, Alberta. This model seemed to have limited impact on classroom practices and as services shifted to regional collaborative service delivery, we looked for an approach that allowed more ongoing support.

Our first solution involved establishing communities of practice in some of our schools with volunteer teams that included a teacher, EA and administrator. The teams received classroom consultations and then met by video conference for monthly discussions. The approach was positively received, but participants were observed to have difficulty incorporating the strategies into their classroom activities.

Our most recent attempt was refocused to take advantage of the provincial emphasis on pairing augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) with literacy; this is grounded in the work of Karen Erickson from the Center for Literacy & Disability Studies. The project was branded as CoA-ACtion and expanded to include almost all of the students in the district with CCN. The program incorporated a number of new elements, including:

- Purposeful collaboration of an assistive technology specialist/teacher and speech-language pathologist to highlight the need for this professional relationship for students with CCN;
- A series of professional development sessions building philosophical and background knowledge; and

- Direct modelling and guided practice of the key components and program concepts.

Strategies were also provided by the consultants for supporting student transitions to new grades and teachers. An online repository—made available to all PHPS staff—included a broad compendium of resources collected throughout the year. As well, participants were invited to email concerns between visits and reflective interviews were conducted with all of the participants at the end of the year.

While all students were seen to benefit from the program, the success of the approach proved to be highly team dependent. Teacher philosophy and style often did not align with the strategies being suggested by the consultants. Sometimes consultants found it was difficult to arrange a visit when the target child was working on literacy activities in the classroom. Teachers also seemed reluctant to share work samples or videos of activities. One administrator suggested teachers appeared to feel anxiety working in an area outside of their traditional training and had high expectations for themselves or feared being judged negatively.

A teacher commented that other teachers had suggested there was significant work being directed to one student at the expense of the other children. Teachers expressed frustration



with how to include these children in the curriculum and often had diverse beliefs about the academic capabilities of students with CCN.

### Steps forward

All our team members had to learn a lot about the AAC devices. They were challenged by the differences in the developmental presentations of CCN. If a team member was absent for an extended time, the replacement had a very hard time picking up the specified intervention. Noting this, one of our teachers decided to follow the student with CCN into the next grade so she and her educational assistants could continue working with the child rather than have a new team start over learning how to provide support.

The principal supported this move, illustrating the need to engage administrators in this program. School leader involvement was essential to facilitate staff placements and arrange for professional development. One administrator commented that she felt it was imperative that she could communicate with all the children in the school. Administrators were also cheerleaders who exerted an influence on what the progress teams accomplished. Growth appeared to be more successful when there was someone who could maintain the momentum of implementation between the monthly consultations and troubleshooting issues.

This issue of communication seemed to be connected to much of the success. A principal suggested that honest communication between the consultants and teachers needed to be encouraged. This was not meant as a criticism of anyone's professionalism, but as an observation that the team perspectives were often well motivated but quite different. For instance, many front-line staff resisted implementing new ideas when a student was experiencing periods of dysregulation and behavioural issues. In contrast, the consultants were suggesting that addressing communication or developing engaging activities might directly address those behavioural concerns.

In another case, a teacher was concerned about the social development of a student who was spending significant time with one of the children with complex communication issues instead of her regular peers, while the

consultant was thrilled to see the student with CCN forging a friendship.

Teachers often displayed an inconsistent understanding and application of inclusive learning and frequently had diverse beliefs about the academic capabilities of students with CCN. The consultants reported that schools and teaching teams were frequently unaware of the nature and implications of the diagnoses underlying the learning and communication challenges for students with CCN. This made it difficult for them to understand their student and the reasons for suggestions about programming.

This type of project involved different demands for school staff than typical professional development does. Teachers are often heard to comment that if they get one good idea from training, it has been successful. This thinking implies that teachers will pick and choose a few new approaches.

### CoAACtion in action

CoAACtion had been envisioned to be a more interactive and cyclical process in which the consultants would provide suggestions. Then, based on observations and staff feedback, consultants would provide new directions. Progress was certainly more evident where this reciprocal relationship was observed, such as a teacher who reluctantly agreed to try a communication board for carpet activities and then requested more communication boards so the strategy could be implemented at multiple locations in the classroom.

While not without its challenges, we saw wide-spread benefits from the project. School staff could readily explain many of the major issues in working with children with CCN. Staff recognized the benefits of learning to slow down activities and allow adequate response time, that no response did not mean the child was not processing and that multiple methods of communication gave a child more options.

School staff could articulate that academic development looked different than for typical children and that they felt more comfortable understanding this progression. Participants were able to explain how they had applied the methods to other children outside the project. Teachers also observed that the

same balanced approach to literacy used for typical students was the same framework necessary for the students who were the focus of the project.

Our experiences with the CoAACtion project illustrates many of the challenges and opportunities with inclusive education. Strong relationships and communication of an entire support team are essential, as are common understandings about the nature of CCN and the potential of students. The skill of the team is less important than a prerequisite belief that all children can learn and that the effort is necessary to help them be included physically, socially and academically. Building the skills to support students with complex needs is essential, but is time-consuming and challenging because it is outside the professional realm of most school staff. When these factors can be aligned, the evidence indicates it produced significant benefits for the targeted students as well as other children. ■

*Rob McGarva is the Director of Student Services for Pembina Hills Public Schools. The author would like to recognize Lori Hughes, assistive technology specialist/teacher; Kelly Lucky, speech language pathologist; and Shirley Craig, inclusion consultant, for their dedicated commitment to implementing this project. Thanks also to Liz Webster and Pam Reeves-Murphy for their help in planning and supporting CoAACtion.*



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# Leadership Learning: Promising Practices to Inclusive Learning

*"Unless positive changes occur in the classroom little will improve. We can have all the conversations about instructional leadership, but change needs to occur at the grassroots with instruction and assessment otherwise students learning is not positively impacted." – Dr. Paul Mason*

*By Dr. Paul Mason, Kathleen Finnigan, Ryan Ledene, Dr. David F. Khatib, Patricia MacRae-Pasula, Rori-Lynn Daniel and Teresa Borchers, Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools*

Similar to many school districts across the province, Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools (RDCRS) continues to believe that system-wide change and growth occurs through a strong, centrally organized professional development (PD) structure. Using in-house expertise to disseminate research-based pedagogical practices has been the mainstay of teacher growth.

However, the aspect of one size fits all PD delivery has proven to garner limited success. As our division embraced change, we recognized that school communities were at different places within the change process.

## Structure

When the district focus of literacy, inclusion, faith and technology (LIFT) was established, the centrally planned structure was still that of implementing cascade PD. A representation of teachers from each school would participate in PD and then bring the new learning back to their schools.

Usually, these teachers would be progressive in their teaching practices and willingly implemented new pedagogy into their own classrooms, but were not impacting whole school change. We recognized we weren't helping all teachers move forward with new pedagogy, hence a unique professional learning structure was established to support the entire system.

RDCRS implemented a Community of Practice (COP) model to meet these challenges. The COP divides the district into "like" school cohorts. Using demographic indicators such as urban or rural makeup, socio-economic status, standardized test scores and incidents of academic support, the COP cohorts were placed into four like-school categories.

French Immersion is a separate cohort given the unique challenges that naturally present themselves. Collecting similar demographic schools together fosters focused and relevant PD topics while encouraging rich professional conversations.

An important aspect to the COP model is that all of our teachers attend four PD sessions throughout the year. This allows for continuity of messaging and focus on LIFT priorities. Administrators embraced the opportunity to learn alongside teachers as they participate in these cohort sessions. Using the research of Fullan and Robinson, systemic change is more likely to occur when leaders are involved in the process.<sup>1,2</sup>

Through collaborative processes involving central office and school-based administrators, mutually agreed upon non-negotiables

were established to support high-yielding instructional strategies that increase student achievement. Non-negotiables are introduced, explained and reviewed with all participants at cohort sessions, with school-based administrators supporting the implementation at the school level.

In addition, through the Leadership for Learning Project, collaboration time has been built into weekly timetables whereby each teacher meets with their grade team and administrator. This project design ensures instructional leadership is developed and shared in a collaborative environment led by administration teams. Our hope is that the project will generate the most effective teaching and assessment practices in every classroom to meet the needs of all learners.





## THE SUCCESS OF OUR COP MODEL LIES IN THE ACRONYM OF LIFT.

### Literacy

The literacy journey began by supporting each school in developing common literacy beliefs, fostering rich dialogue among teachers as to what they believe strong literacy practices look, sound and feel like for all students. During this time, we looked closely at the research and high-yield practices that outlined the attributes of a literacy-rich, inclusive school environment. This included taking inventory of the literacy resources and assessments being used in schools and working diligently to get books into the hands of students.

All schools made it a priority to build classroom libraries, as they are the centrepiece to any literacy program. A foundational element in our literacy journey was unpacking the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model with all teacher and, supporting them in identifying how this instructional model supports student learning.

Specific literacy non-negotiables were established together with administrators. These included continued focus on the program of studies, a 90 minute literacy block and a literacy assessment. Teachers were provided with PD to support effective literacy structures and strategies which included reading comprehension strategies, the Three Part Learning Framework, reciprocal teaching and Marzano and Pickering's Academic Vocabulary.<sup>3</sup>

Literacy intervention also became more of a focus. We transitioned to classroom teachers providing literacy intervention to support our most vulnerable students and we used strong research-based practices.

### Inclusion

Our journey began with an increased understanding of inclusion being focused on programming and not student placement. As a result, we transitioned from a traditional structure of pull-out support to a pull-in model within classrooms. A collaborative approach was established with each school being allocated an inclusive lead teacher as part of the LIFT team to provide expertise and leadership in programming for all learners. For learners with more complex needs, our division-based Model of Student Support Team (MS2)—which includes a psychologist, behaviour specialist, mental health consultant and cognitive learning

specialist—support school-based teams to meet specific learner needs in a collaborative approach. Our goal has been to build capacity in our LIFT team members and classroom teachers by providing strong universal, targeted and specialized strategies aligning with a robust response to intervention model. The focus of the LIFT teams in meeting the diverse needs in classrooms revolves around a flexible, responsive, strength-based approach.

Data informs instructional practices to meet diverse learning needs. Teachers engage in reflective collaborative processes, determining

appropriate instructional strategies that create a strong foundation of knowing, understanding and responding to the unique individual learner. Information for identified learners is captured and collated on the Continuum of Supports and Services document at each school.

This document was a catalyst for developing learner profiles which support strong transition plans as students move from grade to grade. A web-based data management system that captures student achievement and strategies is being implemented across the division. Through this comprehensive inclusion model,



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our learners' needs are being met and supported with teachers delivering engaging and meaningful inclusive programming.

## Faith

Faith remains an integral piece of who we are as a school division. It is not a stand-alone component to our mandate, but rather the flavour infused within everything we do. The inclusive model aligns beautifully with our foundational belief that each child is a unique creation of God with the same inherent value as any other child.

Each child of God needs to be afforded the best education we can provide and the gifts and talents they possess contribute to the school community, but also the extended community in which they will enter as adults. Our goal as a denominational education system is to produce graduates who examine the world through a lens of faith that is shaped by gospel values infused within our provincial curriculum.

It is a constitutional obligation that we willingly accept, and our LIFT model ensures that faith remains an essential component to any initiative we embrace. Faith coaches support

teachers in each of our schools to further enhance the permeation of faith.

## Technology

The seamless integration of technology into the classroom remains a challenge in terms of effective school and division sponsored PD. Using the Learning Technology Policy Framework documents as a guide and focusing on Policy Direction 1 (Student-Centred Learning), each school in the district receives a tech coach FTE allocation.

Rather than globally instilling division goals on the use of technology, each school addresses individual teacher and student needs in terms of using it in an authentic manner. Employing the Substitution, Augmentation, Modification and Redefinition Model as a guide, each school-based tech coach assesses how teachers are using technology in their classrooms. They then facilitate a growth conversation focusing on using effective 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills.

## Summary

The success we are experiencing is a direct result of the creativity and willingness of our teachers to develop/implement

engaging classroom environments that benefit all students as well as the instructional leadership demonstrated by our administrators. As a result of our work, students and families articulate welcoming and supportive schools and recognize that staff is committed to supporting students within faith-filled inclusive learning communities. ■

*Dr. Paul Mason, Superintendent; Kathleen Finnigan, Associate Superintendent of Inclusive Learning; Ryan Ledene, Associate Superintendent of Faith Development and Division Support; Dr. David F. Khatib, Division Principal; Patricia MacRae-Pasula, Director of Inclusive Learning; Rori-Lynn Daniel, Vice-Principal; and Teresa Borchers, Literacy and ESL Lead Teacher, are all from Red Deer Catholic Regional Schools.*

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## Leading the Way to Inclusive and Healthy School Communities

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By Graham Lowe, Ph.D.

Alberta's educational leaders have at their fingertips the opportunity to support the province's school system's performance to reach new heights. The biggest potential for improvement is found in the concepts of inclusive education and healthy school communities.

According to Alberta Education, "Inclusion is not just about learners with special needs. It is an attitude and approach that embraces diversity and learner differences and promotes equal opportunities for all learners in Alberta." The Joint Consortium for Healthy School Communities' demonstrates how comprehensive school health links student success to school health.

These ambitious reform goals are achievable with the right combination of leadership and resources. What's required is for educational leaders to be resilient, supported in their jobs to achieve optimal personal well-being and to be transformational in their leadership style. What follows outlines what CASS members can do to put in place these three pre-conditions for success.

### Beyond resilience: psychological capital

Educational leaders face heightened risks to their well-being given the demands

of their role in an educational system defined by rapid change, rising expectations and resource constraints.

Confronting these challenges and turning them into opportunities, requires leaders to be resilient. Resilient leaders thrive in the face of adversity. They bounce forward to find new strength and equilibrium as they work their way through challenges. They move to a new normal that enables them to progress toward a better future, finding opportunities and renewed energy.

Yet, today's leaders need more than just resilience. That's why researchers have developed the broader concept of psychological capital (PsyCap) to encompass not only a person's capacity to be resilient, but also to be hopeful, confident and optimistic.

Here's a check-list you can use to assess PsyCap. Do you or your team:

1. Always look on the bright side of things at work?
2. Feel optimistic about your/their future career?
3. Manage difficulties one way or another at work?
4. Take stressful things at work in stride?
5. See yourself/themselves as being successful at work?
6. Think of many ways to get out of a jam at work?

7. Feel confident contributing to discussions about organizational strategy?
8. Feel confident presenting information to a group of colleagues?
9. Avoid taking work stress home?

### Why psychological capital matters

PsyCap is related to a range of organizational outcomes critical to a successful educational system. In this regard, PsyCap is similar to what educational experts Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan call professional capital, which combines individual talent, collaboration and sound educational decision-making.

There's abundant evidence showing that leaders with well-developed PsyCap have better overall physical and mental health than their colleagues who lack PsyCap. They are also better able to manage the stresses of their job and less likely to experience burnout.

Teachers, principals and system administrators who possess strong professional capital are also transformational in their leadership style. Transformational leaders are needed to improve school performance and students' educational outcomes.

### Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership goes far beyond a transactional or goal-oriented leadership



style by enabling individuals to achieve their potential, find innovative solutions to challenges and embrace change. Transformational leaders motivate others to strive for higher levels of performance, are admired and trusted, stimulate creative thinking and are attuned to individuals' growth needs by acting as a coach or mentor.

Listed below are the hallmarks of a transformational educational leader. Assess your own leadership style by asking how frequently you do the following:

1. Articulate a compelling vision of the future for education and for your school jurisdiction;
2. Express confidence that school jurisdiction goals will be achieved;
3. Seek differing perspectives when solving problems;
4. Get others to look at problems from many different angles;
5. Go beyond self-interest for the good of students, teachers and communities;
6. Act in ways that build others' respect for you;
7. Consider the moral and ethical consequences of decisions;
8. Communicate the importance of having a strong sense of purpose;
9. Help others develop their strengths; and
10. Teach and coach your staff.

### Healthy educational workplaces

A comprehensive view of a healthy school community includes educational workplaces. If schools and other educational system workplaces are healthy, this sets a positive tone for health promotion across the school community. Teachers themselves are healthier, leaders are more effective and students have positive role models for healthy lifestyles.

Organizational research shows that work environment, job and organizational factors impact individuals' well-being and organizational performance. These same factors—working relationships, role clarity, job resources, training and professional development, job autonomy, job demands and work hours—also contribute to transformational leadership behaviours.

With these important connections in mind, CASS members can promote healthier educational workplaces by taking these actions:

- Initiate an open discussion of how well-being enables the type of leadership required to continuously improve Alberta's education system during a time of resource constraints.
- Demonstrate as a model for others to emulate Leadership Dimension 5 in the *CASS Practice Standard*: "The CASS member provides exemplary leadership by building trust and effective relationships with the school system community." Trust, along with positive, respectful working relationships are the hallmarks of a healthy, inclusive workplace.
- Adopt an inclusive approach to promoting health and wellness, emphasizing that if teachers, principals and administrators experience their work environment as healthy, students are more likely to perceive a positive learning environment.
- Partner with ASEBP to promote the use of available mental and physical health promotion resources, especially related to stress reduction and work-life balance;
- Identify workplace risks to optimal mental and physical health so solutions can be implemented.
- Incorporate PsyCap and transformational leadership into CASS leadership and professional development programs.

### CASS-ASEBP partnership

ASEBP is an active partner with CASS in its quest for the kind of healthy workplace needed to support successful leadership. It will also be strengthening its communication with CASS members about available resources, providing more mental health resources and benefits, and continuing to highlight health and wellness promotion and prevention.

CASS and ASEBP understand that individuals flourish in work environments that support their well-being. Together, as partners committed to promoting health and well-being in the education sector workplace, CASS and ASEBP are contributing to the bigger goals of inclusive education and healthy school communities. ■

*Graham Lowe is a workplace consultant, author and professor emeritus at the University of Alberta. He first provided ASEBP expert advice on organizational health in 1998. He has also provided consulting services on a wide range of workplace issues and leadership development to hundreds of organizations in many industries across Canada and internationally. He is the author of *Creating Healthy Organizations: How Vibrant Workplaces Inspire Employees to Achieve Sustainable Success* ([creatinghealthyorganizations.ca](http://creatinghealthyorganizations.ca)).*


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