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the **CASS** CONNECTION **Fall 2022**

The official magazine for the College of Alberta School Superintendents



A New Era: Traversing the Road Ahead



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The official magazine for the College of
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Fall 2022

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contents



CASS

College of
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Messages:

- 6** Message from the Alberta Minister of Education
- 7** Message from the CASS President
- 9** Message from the CASS Chief Executive Officer

FOCUS ON... A NEW ERA: TRAVERSING THE ROAD AHEAD

Features:

- 10** The Pursuit of our Potential
- 12** Future Directions for Professional Learning Approaches
- 16** Promoting Female Leaders in Alberta School Authorities: CASS Women in Leadership Committee
- 18** Early Literacy Teaching
- 20** Knowing, Being, and Doing
- 22** Building a Road Map for Continuous System Improvement

Healthy People, Healthy Workplace:

- 25** Adapting to Change Through Flexible Leadership

INDEX TO ADVERTISERS

ARCHITECT

Workun Garrick Partnership..... 23

ATTORNEYS

Brownlee LLP..... 13
McLennan Ross LLP..... 9

BENEFIT PLANS

Alberta Retired Teachers' Association..... 4
Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan..... IFC

COLLEGE

Bredin..... 23

FAMILY RECOVERY GROUP/ADDICTION PROGRAMS

PEP Society..... 26

FUNDRAISER

Calahoo Meats..... 11

GYMNASTICS

Ortona Gymnastics..... 26

HAND HYGIENE AND COMMERCIAL RESTROOM PRODUCTS

Dobbin Sales (Sloan)..... 3

HOTEL

Fantasyland Hotel..... IBC

LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Markanyx Solutions Inc..... 8

MUSEUM

Alberta Aviation Museum..... 26

PROCUREMENT

Public Services & Procurement Canada..... 24

ROOFING ASSOCIATION

Alberta Roofing Contractors Association..... 19

SCHOOL FURNITURE AND WORKSTATION SUPPLIER

CDI Spaces..... 13

STEM CLASSROOM AND PL RESOURCES

Let's Talk Science..... OBC

STUDENT GROUP TRAVEL IN MANITOBA

Tourism Winnipeg..... 14-15

TEXTBOOK AND WORKBOOK SUPPLIER

Western Campus Resources..... 17

UNIVERSITIES

University of Alberta - Professional Learning..... 21
Werklund School of Education -
University of Calgary..... 24





Message from the Minister of Education

Adriana LaGrange | Alberta Minister of Education

The 2022/2023 school year is underway, and things are shaping up to be much different than the previous two years. Alberta's government and our education partners are now in a much better position to set our sights on the future and on traversing the road ahead. I want to express a deep appreciation for the outstanding leadership, collaborative spirit, and herculean efforts the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) members demonstrated to continually adapt to the changing situation these past two years. Your efforts helped ensure students and the education system were supported every step along the way.

We know the last two years have impacted students learning and CASS members can rely on Alberta's government to continue supporting ongoing work to help students recover from pandemic-related impacts. Alberta's government is increasing Education spending by \$700 million over the next three years. Through Budget 2022, Alberta Education's operating budget is \$8.4 billion. This includes an unprecedented increase of \$700 million over the next three years. We are investing an additional \$110 million to address student mental health and wellness and COVID-19 learning loss. This funding includes \$10 million per year for the next two school years to support pilot projects focused on enhancing the continuum of mental health supports and services, including tools, training, and resources for the school community.

This investment also includes \$10 million per year for the next two school years to increase students' access to specialized assessments. Additionally, we will continue to provide funding to address students' learning disruptions due to the pandemic. In May 2021, we announced up to \$45

million for school authorities to provide targeted programming for students in Grades 1 to 3 during the 2021/2022 school year. In June 2022, we announced an extension of this funding with \$10 million in 2022/2023 for students in that same cohort who may still need help and will now be in Grades 2 to 4.

Alberta's government has also made significant improvements to the education system through legislation. The *College of Alberta School Superintendents Act* has solidified CASS' role in upholding the standards of practice for superintendents and deputy superintendents in public, separate or francophone school authorities. The act further strengthens the important role your college plays in our education system and recognizes the significant impact superintendents have on students and teachers.

Last spring, we also passed legislation to enhance the accountability and transparency of the teaching profession, further protect students and give parents peace of mind. The *Reforming Teacher Profession Discipline Act* ensures all teachers and teacher leaders (including superintendents) in Alberta are subject to the same disciplinary system, and the *Students First Act* provides more transparency through public reporting on Alberta teacher and teacher leader certification.

These acts lay the groundwork for establishing the Alberta Teaching Profession Commission, which will be at arm's length from the government and will oversee conduct and competency complaints for all teachers and teacher leaders equally. Establishing a new Alberta Teaching Profession Commission will help increase public confidence in the teaching profession by removing any perception of conflicts of interest.

To further strengthen the education system and teaching profession, we

launched a new online teacher registry in September that is similar to those for members of other professions in Alberta, such as doctors, lawyers, nurses, and engineers. A registry sends a clear message that both the government and Alberta's teachers care deeply about professionalism in our schools and about safe learning environments for students.

The Alberta government has also been collaborating with CASS and other education partners to develop a single code of professional conduct for all teachers and teacher leaders. Having a single unified code of conduct will modernize and harmonize standards across the province. The new code of professional conduct will come into effect on January 1, 2023.

We also remain committed to renewing the Kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum and ensuring students are positioned for success in the classroom and beyond. Our government has dedicated \$191 million over three years to support curriculum implementation across the province and help teachers prepare. We will continue to work closely with CASS and make sure teachers are supported with professional learning opportunities and classroom resources during all piloting and implementation processes.

The government's collaborative relationship with CASS has been integral to continually improving the education system for teachers, teacher leaders, students, and their families. Thank you again for your leadership, dedication, and insightful feedback. By continuing to work together, we can chart an even brighter future for K-12 education in Alberta.

Adriana LaGrange
Minister of Education



Message from the President

Dr. Scott Morrison | College of Alberta School Superintendents

As we ponder this issue of *The CASS Connection's* theme, "A New Era: Traversing the Road Ahead," we owe a debt of gratitude to the leaders who completed submissions for this publication.

Happy start to the 2022/2023 school year!

When it comes to leadership, I frequently reflect on Broadwell's (1969) timeless Hierarchy of Competence theory. The lowest level of Broadwell's hierarchy is unconscious incompetence. At this level, we can't do something well, and we aren't even aware of it. Above that is conscious incompetence. At this level, we can't do something well, but at least we are aware of it. Above that is conscious competence. At this level, we can do something if we methodically follow an internal script that acts as a scaffold for us. At the top of the pyramid is the holy grail that Broadwell calls unconscious competence. At this level, we can do something automatically and effortlessly.

I referred to unconscious competence as the "holy grail," yet Broadwell unpredictably asserts that the best leaders may be those who can step back to a level of conscious competence. The reason is that they not only

know how to do something, but they also know how to teach someone else to do it. For example, like many of you, I'm unconsciously competent at responding to conflict. I've given principals hours of one-on-one coaching in advance of approaching contentious situations. My advice has been situational and I've not been aware of a heuristic I was using, until I recently stumbled on a three-step method that actually made me aware of the steps I was unconsciously adhering to: 1) Actively listen, ask open-ended questions, and avoid rushing to solutions too soon; 2) Explain what you know and what was done to try and prevent the conflict at hand; and 3) Identify at least one new action to resolve the conflict. Now that I have the

steps, instead of long-drawn-out conversations with principals, I say, "Let's plan your approach, following the three steps".

As we ponder this issue of *The CASS Connection's* theme, "A New Era: Traversing the Road Ahead," we owe a debt of gratitude to the leaders who completed submissions for this publication. In so doing, they described a responsive and/or innovative pathway toward improvement. By sharing their submissions, these leaders have gifted us with the additional resource of helping to make us conscious of the steps they have taken, thereby giving us concrete suggestions to replicate their ideas.

Dr. Scott Morrison

College of Alberta School Superintendents

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Message from the Chief Executive Officer

David Keohane | College of Alberta School Superintendents

Celebrating a New Era for System Education Leaders

The inventor and innovator Thomas Edison probably scared those around him when he mused, “opportunity is missed because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.” While current change leaders in education don’t dismiss rolling up their sleeves for the sake of children, they do look at pursuing new possibilities through a heavy reliance on planning, collaboration, and delegation – not just blood, sweat, and tears. Behind the work of any of these leaders is the purposeful application of social capital and associated strategic components. These include establishing a clear vision, backed by a compelling rationale: taking iterative steps through time, creating supportive networks of like minded and motivated people, and leveraging extensive communication with those vested in the change agenda.

The stories of change that create new opportunities for staff and students in our learning system within this issue of *The CASS Connection* clearly demonstrate varieties of intentional planning and execution

The stories of change that create new opportunities for staff and students in our learning system within this issue of *The CASS Connection* clearly demonstrate varieties of intentional planning and execution in system planning that champions success.

in system planning that champions success. As such, I celebrate all our contributors and know that their stories will either reinforce or reinvigorate opportunities currently taken by other system education leaders to optimize learning for students in our post-pandemic reality.

Speaking of the new era ahead, I would be remiss not to emphasize the great opportunities that are in the making for our membership of system education leaders as we embrace our newly legislated mandate. Through implementing the objects of the *College of Alberta School Superintendents Act*, the College of Alberta School Superintendents’ (CASS) focuses going forward will be threefold: supporting individual members through enhancing their service to

their school authorities, providing a learned perspective on school system administration and operations to education partners, and implementing a continuing education program for members that assures their accreditation and growth in supporting professional standards of practice. Our College will be proud to serve the public interest in these ways.

Here’s to a great year ahead supported by stories of practice that fulfill the hopes and dreams of each student in your care! May opportunities that come to life through a new era of change be your constant companion on the journey ahead.

David Keohane

College of Alberta School Superintendents

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The Pursuit of our Potential

By Dr. Christopher Fuzessy,
Foothills School Division

We are a learning organization that has weathered adversity together and we are stronger for it. Through our hard work, determination, and collective contributions we have demonstrated great resilience. In the spring of 2022, we began imagining what we could accomplish moving forward and beyond the pandemic. What if we moved with renewed intentionality toward ensuring our vision of engagement, support, and success for each learner across our division?

This question guided us to engage with our staff and leadership team in multiple ways over the course of the spring of 2022, and now into the new 2022/2023 school year. We asked our team to engage in a web-based survey and had a response rate of over 75 per cent of our entire staff team. They provided their perspective on

several themes. We wanted to know how they experienced the last several years. How we can improve. What should we carry forward? How do we become the next iteration of the best of our organization?

We learned that our team was in different places and that we need to remain attuned to this as we carry our work forward. We need to meet our team members, students, and community where they are, as we build back with better connections in mind. We also learned that there is a state of readiness in our organization to renew positive connections and drive the work forward with renewed purpose.

This led to the creation of several ‘gatherings’ or focus groups of team members to reflect upon a variety of topics and questions. We engaged in dialogue around a vision for our organization in 2072. We reflected upon what a sustainable and flourishing organization looks like and what its role is within our community. We discussed

re-envisioning our learner profiles and wondered about how to restructure our work to ‘take things off the plate’ for our leadership and division team.

We engaged in structured dialogue and reflection work around moving from purpose to practice. We also gathered to work through questions about continuing to improve our organizational culture. What does this look like and how to iterate forward with success? In considering all these questions and topics as well as the insights we gained, we are planning forward with a new organizational purpose to achieve.

Our work this year is guided by actualizing our vision of engagement, support, and success for each learner. Within this vision, each of us is considered a learner alongside our students. And within this vision we are called upon to achieve our new and collective purpose, that of *placing education at the center of a flourishing community*. Connecting all that we do – the decisions we make,

THE PURSUIT OF OUR POTENTIAL



the actions we take – to our purpose, is a critical element that will fuel the pursuit of our potential. As we begin a new school year, we have invited our entire staff team to consider and determine their individual contribution to our shared purpose.

Like our students, we all have individual areas of interest and passion that can contribute to the achievement of our organizational purpose. How does each team member help bring education to the center of our Foothills community? What calls each team member to do this work in education? How can we each focus our energies every day on this area of passion within and fuel the larger organization? Can this focus fuel both the individual and the collective work and allow our purpose to be achieved?

We all attend to many tasks in the variety of roles we play. We are not suggesting that any of us can solely focus on our individual area of interest or passion to the exclusion of our other responsibilities. Rather, if we all choose to connect with our individual purpose and let it guide our approach to the work we do every day, we can and will make a positive difference for ourselves, our happiness within our work, for our colleagues, and for our students and their success. They are after all why we are all here.

Concurrent to this work, we have also moved forward with a continuing priority of wellness and wellbeing for our entire community. Over the last few years, the boundaries between home and work have become blurred. Online courses, virtual meetings, working from home and flexible working arrangements have become part of our landscape, for better or worse. In experiencing these changes along with the Foothills community, Foothills School Division is trying to be proactive, adapt and safeguard family time for each of our stakeholders.

We introduced an administrative procedure called Safeguarding Learner Work Life Excellence during the last school year.¹ The intent of this procedure is to help reestablish healthy boundaries between work life and home life, for our students, staff team and parents. We have also moved from three learner profiles to two during the school year, prioritizing instructional time for instruction and assessment as we continue to implement our instructional model of learning that transfers. We have also moved to a fixed three-year education plan to assess our progress following sustained focus on our goals.

We have an awesome responsibility in the field of education. Our work consists, every day, of positively influencing the learning and growth of our students. This by extension benefits our entire community locally and provincially, at the national level, and beyond. Our actions and decisions across the division provide the conditions for our students to succeed and to flourish. With renewed purpose, our team is collectively placing education at the center of a flourishing Foothills community. ■

Dr. Christopher Fuzessy has worked in nearly every role in education over the course

of his career, moving to Alberta from Montreal three years ago to join the Foothills team as Superintendent of Schools. He holds a B.Ed., M.A., and Ph.D. in Education.

Reference

1. Foothills School Division. "Administrative Procedure 414: Safeguarding Learner Work Life Excellence." <https://foothillstorage.blob.core.windows.net/media/Default/medialib/414-safeguarding-learner-work-life-excellence-created-oct-21.f12fd96942.pdf>

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Alberta **Regional** Consortia

*By Sandra Ciurysek, ARPDC;
Dr. Gloria Antifaiff, CASS;
Madeleine Lemire, ARPDC;
& Krystal Abrahamowicz,
Foundations for the Future
Charter Academy*



Future Directions for Professional Learning Approaches

Alberta's teachers and members of the education community have been well served by the Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia (ARPDC) team since 1995. Over the past two and half years, amidst the challenging unprecedented circumstances of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, ARPDC was called upon to support the education partners across the province in meeting the professional learning needs of education partners across Alberta including teachers, school and system leads, support staff, and parents. ARPDC rose to the challenge.

Prior to the pandemic, the ARPDC regional offices offered learning opportunities in their respective regions, with a variety of options for online sessions, e-courses, other asynchronous opportunities, and in-person sessions. The online regional sessions were open to provincial participation. Provincially offered sessions were typically coordinated provincial tours of presenters recognized as leaders in their respective fields. Presenters would travel throughout the province presenting full day sessions with educators attending the session closest to them, or if a conflict existed, traveling on another date to take the training in at another venue. Sessions were rarely recorded, lasted the day,

and participants returned to their classroom to apply what they had learned. In some instances, presenters were scheduled to return the next year for follow-up sessions intended for those who had attended the previous session.

A key shift in the work was manifested in response to the challenges born of COVID-19. With a province-wide shortage of substitute teachers and a desire to limit the number of physical contacts in a cohort, most learning opportunities were scheduled virtually and around the school day, professional learning days, and generally outside of classroom instruction hours. In addition, where a typical presentation had been in-person and frequently a full day, moving to an online format facilitated by an ARPDC video-conferencing license, sessions were offered in 45-, 60-, 75-, 90-, and 120-minute blocks, and often booked and attended as a series of these time blocks to extend and follow-up on learning.

Where the learning opportunity was not directly linked to a school or division professional learning time in a non-instructional day, the learning opportunity was offered before school, during lunch, after school (4:00-5:30/6:00), early evening (6:00-7:30), and Saturday mornings. Significant positive feedback about these learning opportunities

spurred innovation and ongoing ways to diversify offering ways of learning.

Another key challenge was, and remains, exploring and refining ways by which learning can be accessed when and where needed by members of the education community. ARPDC challenged designers of professional learning to consider: what can we prepare, share, and put in the hands of teachers and leaders that supports their learning beyond synchronous in-person/online learning opportunities? Meeting the need of "any way/any time" learning highlights the diversity of the ARPDC team and the approaches and talents of each office, our consultant teams individually and collectively.

Throughout the 2020 to 2022 school years, collaboration between consortia offices at all levels worked to maximize the quantity and quality of learning opportunities provided in the regions and province wide. ARPDC collaboration on projects such as the French Language Resources Site, ARPDC Learn & Go Library, the Flexible Learning Project online library, as well as the development of various e-Courses, PD Playlists, Facebook Groups, and partnerships with Hapara and Connect2Learning (C2L) highlight the collective efforts of our team.

Though in-person learning opportunities have resumed across the province, online

synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities remain a popular and frequent option for many of our school divisions/authorities and education partners. Regional work, with learning opportunities to meet the emerging needs of their respective regions remains the primary level of engagement for consortia, however many of the online opportunities remain open to provincial participants. Provincially offered sessions, whether planned and supported by time and finances by multiple or all consortia offices or offered provincially through planning and finance of one regional office, allow for a wider variety and options for all adult learners in the province.

The entire ARPDC team extends our profound gratitude to the thousands of educators and education community team members who gave of their own time in unprecedented ways

to continue their learning during a pandemic. We remain collectively inspired by their effort and deeply appreciate the countless comments of thanks extended our way for the learning opportunities and resources they accessed. Educators, education assistants, and our education partners across the province had access to world class training at little or no cost to the individual other than their time. School authorities have repeatedly indicated that the work and support provided by ARPDC consortia members in their regions is irreplaceable and essential particularly in light of new curricula being introduced in the 2022/2023 school year. We are committed to supporting school and system leaders in providing 'Adult Learning for Students' Sake.' ■

Sandra Ciurysek has an experienced background in Kindergarten to Grade 12 education

and was a teacher and school administrator before joining the Northwest Regional Learning Consortium as Executive Director. Sandra has been with the ARPDC for over 5 years and is an advocate for lifelong learning.

Dr. Gloria Antifaiff is currently the Principal Leadership Consultant for the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS).

Madeline Lemire is the Executive Director of the Consortium provincial francophone. She has a variety of experiences supporting professional learning as a Consultant, Specialist, and University Associate.

Krystal Abrahamowicz served as the Executive Director of the Calgary Regional Consortium from January 2020 to August 2022 and was a Designer of Professional Learning there for five years prior before moving into the role of Coordinator of Inclusion with Foundations for the Future Charter Academy.



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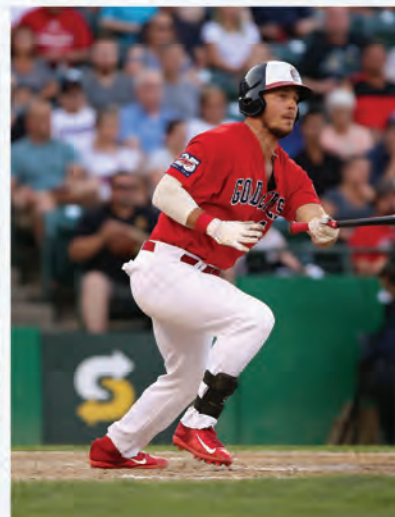
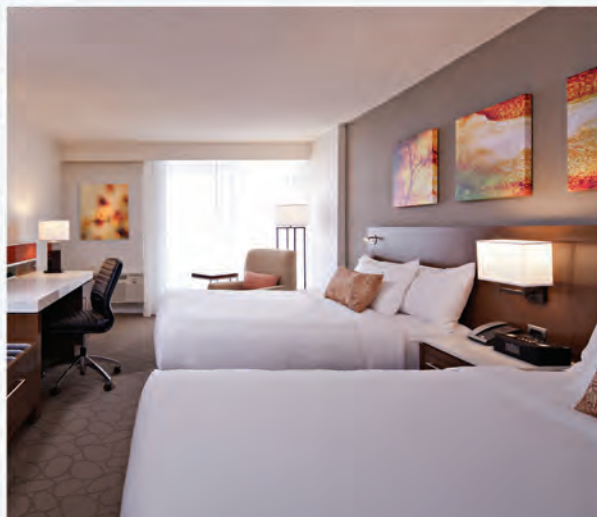
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An architectural marvel of astonishing scale, the **Canadian Museum for Human Rights** will see your class journey from darkness to light through its 11 ever-climbing galleries. During the experience, they'll encounter stories from across the globe that will leave an impression, while interactive galleries, expert guides and fascinating artifacts will implore them to make a difference. Subject matter and thematic tours can be tailored to K-12 school groups, with emphasis ranging from Indigenous concepts of rights, to exploring themes of equality, family and love.

At the **Manitoba Museum**, your class will cover the very ground below you—from giant aquatic lizards of *Jurassic*-film fame who once swam where Winnipeg now sits, to a life-sized bison hunt, to every species you could imagine on the surrounding prairies and in its skies. Its Planetarium can take you to the stars, while hopping aboard *The Nonsuch*—a life-sized 17th century replica ship—is always sure to please. Guided experiences can cover a range of themes for K-12 groups, including Black History in Canada, climate change, Inuit ingenuity and history, and astronomy.

The **Royal Canadian Mint** provides the gold standard in school experiences, combining edutainment in geography, currency and engineering at this state-of-the-art facility, where millions of coins for more than 70 countries are produced. Well-versed tour guides provide the sort of storytelling, history and interactive experiences that your class will find right on the money.

Stay

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Play

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Promoting Female Leaders in Alberta School Authorities:

CASS Women in Leadership Committee

By Della Ruston, CASS

In February of 2020, the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) approved the formation of the Women in Leadership (WiL) ad hoc committee with a mandate to contribute to and support CASS' Strategic Goal 2: Leadership Capacity.

To support this objective, it was necessary to create a collegial, professional learning network for female system leaders and provide opportunities for meeting, learning, partnering, supporting, and celebrating. By designing opportunities with colleagues for collaboration, encouraging input and feedback, promoting initiatives in support of current and aspiring system leaders, and advocating for supports and services, several initiatives have been undertaken during the last two years.

During the 2020/2021 school year, several themed priorities were identified through a Lean in Circle process where female CASS members and male supporters came together to network, learn, and support each other. A multi-year plan was developed addressing the following themes:

1. Communication and Engagement;
2. Mentorship;
3. Professional Learning;
4. Research and Education;
5. Partnerships and External Connections; and
6. Wellness.

One of the initial activities included a Lunch and Learn with Dr. Susan Coates, a principal in Edmonton Catholic Schools, who discussed her research findings and her thesis



The CASS Spring Conference Women in Leadership panel discussion. Photos courtesy of Della Ruston.



During the CASS Spring Conference, a panel of three successful and inspirational women shared their stories of leadership practices in their professions of law, human resources, and a First Nations' Education Authority.

"Pathways to the Superintendency: The Experiences of Albertan Female Superintendents." In 2019/2020, as part of a multi-case study, female superintendents and assistant superintendents were interviewed and asked to identify factors that contributed to or challenged them in their quest for superintendencies. The results concluded that jurisdictional structures and procedures that identify and support the leadership capacities of potential female leaders are most effective in the fostering of female leaders.

During the CASS Spring Conference, a panel of three successful and inspirational women shared their stories of leadership

practices in their professions of law, human resources, and a First Nations' Education Authority. Participants had an opportunity to learn how women in leadership in different contexts are working toward increasing gender equity in their fields and through their organizations.

In the spring of 2022, WiL hosted a book study and discussion with the authors of *Nerve: Lessons on Leadership from Two Women Who Went First* written by Martha Piper and Indira Samarasekera. During this session, they shared their personal and professional experiences of becoming the



first and only female deans of the University of British Columbia and the University of Alberta, respectively. Overcoming challenges and choosing to answer the leadership call were some of the topics that were shared during this session. They believe that if gender equity is to be achieved, women need to look within themselves and address issues that may be standing in the way of their leadership pursuit. The overwhelmingly enthusiastic and positive feedback received from participants led the WiL committee members to organize three follow-up book discussions in the fall of 2022.

A research partnership comprised of the University of Alberta (U of A), the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA), and CASS titled, "Education Leadership at the Intersections of Gender" and funded by the Social Sciences & Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) is currently underway. Led by the U of A researchers Dr. Samira ElAtia and Dr. Elissa Corsi, it will begin with a survey administered through CASS and the ATA looking at the demographics of school and system leaders, an area that has been relatively unexplored.

Research partnerships are supported by WiL in an effort to gather information and create awareness. In 2018/2019 the Diversity, Equity, and Human Rights (DEHR) committee of the ATA created a WiL committee that investigated the experiences and obstacles affecting women in educational leadership. Their needs assessment identified three areas impacting the underrepresentation of women in educational leadership: normative gatekeeping (acceptance of and maintaining a standard of leadership), gender stereotyping, and work/family balance.

Numbers from the CASS Annual General Meeting in March of 2022 and the ATA DEHR committee are illustrative in showing the imbalance at the highest levels of educational leadership. CASS members include 224 female and 201 male members. Of the 79 Superintendents/CEOs, not including First Nation School Authorities, 52 are male and only 27 are female. Recent ATA numbers indicate that up to 74 per cent of the teaching profession is female. Increasing the awareness of this social inequity and developing strategies to address it are the important work of the WiL committee.

Other WiL initiatives included the creation of a CASS WiL newsletter with links to articles and research and a social media celebration of International Women's Day on March 8, 2022.

The WiL group is steadfast in its commitment to advocacy, creating meaningful and collaborative learning opportunities, and to being allies and sponsors of our female leaders. WiL believes there has never been a better time to ensure that women in leadership are promoted and provided opportunities to share their unique competencies. By leveraging these leadership traits, we will ensure excellent teaching and learning that will lead to success for all individuals. By challenging perceptions, removing barriers, creating opportunities, celebrating women's accomplishments, and gender equity will hopefully become a reality in educational leadership. ■

Della Ruston is the Associate Superintendent of Learning Services for the Red Deer School Division and has served on the CASS WiL committee since its inception. She is committed to the sponsorship and promotion of female educators at all levels.

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Early Literacy Teaching

There is consensus among researchers that early literacy teaching in English should focus on teaching grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs) in an explicit, organized, and sequential manner. This article by Mike McMann, Superintendent, Fort Vermilion School Division (FVSD), will analyze the findings from a project delivering teacher led interventions for struggling readers from Kindergarten to Grade 3.

By Michael McMann, Fort Vermilion School Division

According to the Institute for Multi-Sensory Education (2021), “the Science of Reading is a comprehensive body of research that encompasses years of scientific knowledge, spans across many languages, and shares the contributions of experts from relevant disciplines such as education, special education, literacy, psychology, neuroscience, and more. The Science of Reading has evolved from a wide span of research designs, experimental methods, participants, and statistical analyses. This conclusive, empirically supported body of research provides us with the information we need to gain a deeper understanding of how we learn to read, what skills are involved, how they work together, and which parts of the brain are responsible for reading development.” Comprehension is the ultimate goal for reading.

The Science of Reading identifies five essential components that make up the Simple View of Reading, even though many other cognitive-linguistic skills (e.g., morphological awareness) have been identified as playing an important role.

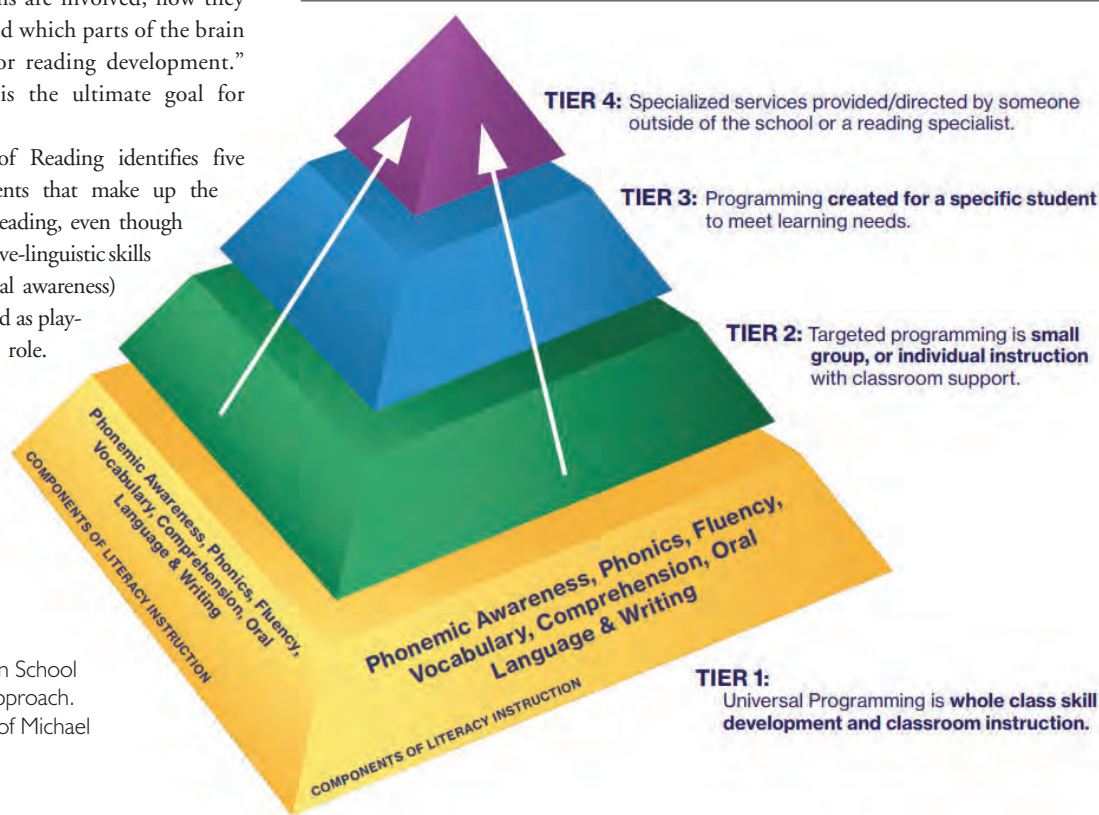
Structured literacy incorporates all five:

1. Phonemic awareness;
2. Phonics;
3. Fluency;
4. Vocabulary; and
5. Comprehension.

In our Fort Vermilion School Division (FVSD) project, we employed a quasi-experimental research design with three measurement points (pre-test, post-test, and delayed post-test). Classes within each school were randomly assigned to the two intervention conditions (phonics vs. phonics plus Set for Variability). We chose this approach for practical reasons: randomly assigning children to the two intervention conditions would

mean that the interventionists would have to coordinate the schedules of children from different classes, and this would be rather difficult to do.

Phonics is the ability to identify that there is a relationship between individual sounds (phonemes) of the spoken language and the letters (graphemes) of the written language. Our main focus is on graphemes and their corresponding sounds in which students work with reading and writing letters according to their sounds, spelling patterns, and phonological structure. The daily instruction and interventions meet the decoding needs of early readers and can be an intervention for students. The following Structured Literacy approach was put in place:



The Fort Vermilion School Division Tiered Approach. Graphic courtesy of Michael McMann.

- Daily explicit instruction and application of sound/symbol connections and alphabetic principle;
- Hands-on materials for student use, such as Elkonin (sound) boxes or letter tiles;
- Opportunity to read decodable books as part of each phonics lesson design;
- Reading and spelling of disciplinary vocabulary using syllables when reading multisyllabic words; and
- Use of a clear scope and sequence that includes the following progression of skills.

One thousand five hundred twenty-six children (752 females and 774 males) from 86 classes in the two participating school divisions were subsequently followed from the beginning of September until the middle of January. In January all students were assessed using a reading accuracy measure (WRAT Word Reading, TOWRE, TOSWRF, TOSREC) to find the ones at-risk for reading difficulties.

In January 2020, all 1,526 children were assessed on WRAT Word Reading. The mean standard score of children from the Fort Vermilion School Division schools was 96.0. This shows that the school division was performing slightly below average (average is 100). There were schools in which 80 per cent of the children qualified for intervention. Children received intervention four times a week for four months. When assessed at the beginning of January 2021, 80 per cent of these children were reading within average range (standard score in Word Reading and Pseudoword Decoding) above 90. Most students made gains of 10 to 15 points on a standard score equal to two to three years of growth.

For the FVSD, this has been the most systematic and explicit reading intervention delivered in our history. At the start of the research project, implementation was challenging since such an intensive reading intervention was new to our district. The intervention utilizes a variety of activities for all children to practice and learn. We learned that it is better for children when they are taught a specific letter-sound correspondence and then see words in real text with that letter-sound correspondence.

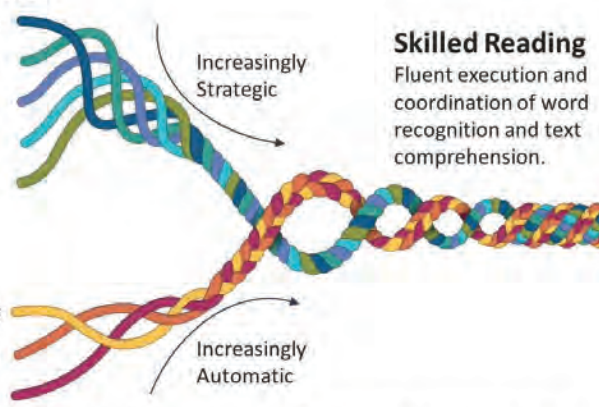
We have succeeded in providing our school division with a structure on how to tackle early literacy problems within all our schools (including schools on reserves). This involves providing teachers quality

Language Comprehension

Background Knowledge
Vocabulary Knowledge
Language Structures
Verbal Reasoning
Literacy Knowledge

Word Recognition

Phonological Awareness
Decoding (and Spelling)
Sight Recognition



Scarborough, H. 2001. Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: Evidence, theory, and practice. Pp. 97-110 in S. B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.) *Handbook of Early Literacy*. NY: Guilford Press.

Connecting early language and literacy to later reading (dis)abilities: evidence, theory, and practice. NY: Guilford Press.

materials to use in their practice, regular review of instruction, and screening for reading difficulties three times per year in September, January, and May. We currently have expanded on what we learned and are providing intensive intervention for all Kindergarten to Grade 3 students. By FVSD implementing interventions to our Grade 2 and 3 children in September 2021, after four months, we found that 85 per cent of students in Grades 2 and 3 were reading within grade level. FVSD used the same intervention with our Grade 1 struggling readers in the winter of 2021 and recorded similar success rates.

Finally, understanding the Science of Reading and implementing structured

literacy supports has allowed FVSD to act quickly, and a significant number of children with early reading difficulties have surpassed their struggles. To succeed, FVSD knows we need to provide small group Tier 3 reading intervention that is targeted and intensive and continue to monitor the progress of these children throughout the year, because some children may regress and may need a second round of intervention. ■

Michael McMann has over 25 years in the Alberta Education system and grew up in rural Alberta. He has a passion for research and moving the dial on every kid in their learning.

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Knowing, Being, and Doing

By Carmen Larsen, Crystal Lothian, &
Aaron Skretting, Holy Spirit Catholic
Schools; & Kurtis Hewson, Jigsaw Learning

In the spring of 2021, the Senior Administrative Leadership Team (SALT) met with Jigsaw Learning to begin to envision how we could better support our schools with their implementation of Collaborative Response, and what it might look like at a divisional level. Prior to this, several schools had been establishing and refining Collaborative Response in their buildings, but the work had not been universal across the division. The key shift was to take the framework and philosophy of Collaborative Response that was being effectively implemented in some of our schools, spread that to the rest of our schools, and to scale it to the divisional level to model the process and demonstrate our own commitment to professional learning at the same time.

This meant looking at Collaborative Response with a new lens. We needed to consider Collaborative Response, with its structures and processes, focus on data and evidence, and continuum of supports, as a mindset that could be applied not only to the needs of students within schools, but to the needs of schools in the division. Essentially, how could it be adopted as a framework for *organizational* success, not just student success.

In the previous model for continuous improvement planning, schools created continuous improvement plans at their own level, using a variety of processes to construct their plans to ensure alignment with the Board priority areas. Three times per year, there would be meetings with three or four school teams. The structure of the meeting involved some reporting and conversation around how schools were operating in each priority. There was little incentive for schools to share their vulnerabilities, little time was dedicated to conversation between schools, and there was no structure to impel any forward motion in growth areas.

There was minimal connection between meetings, and while conversations would

Sharing stories of practices in priority areas. Photo courtesy of Aaron Skretting.



occasionally be penetrating, reflective or tough, those tended to be the exception to the rule. Furthermore, there was a disconnect between the priority areas and our divisional responsiveness. While senior administration heard the stories and engaged in conversation, there was no intentional reflection on how what was being heard could influence how support for schools was structured. This was an area that we knew we could and had to change with a Collaborative Response mindset.

To shift practice but maintain alignment with and focus on our Board priorities, we began by developing indicators of achievement in each priority area (our Data and Evidence), framed with a model of Knowing, Being, and Doing. This process was difficult, and these documents remain very fluid. In initial meetings we used the indicators to create a four-point rubric that

could be used to assess school progress. In subsequent meetings, we would revisit this document to revise and clarify the indicators to ensure that we were pinpointing exactly what achievement would look like in each of the priority areas.

From the development of our rubric with the indicators in each priority area, we then developed the set of questions that would guide the conversations between SALT and school-based administrators for each conversation. Each school had two rotating members of the SALT team four times throughout the year to discuss one of the priorities. The same questions were used for each school visit, and detailed notes were collected as part of the conversations. Schools were encouraged to provide data and evidence that supported what they were seeing happen within their schools. The development of the questions was also a

very fluid process – often we revisited the questions after one or two school visits per round if we found they weren’t getting to the heart of the indicators. At the end of the meeting, often while driving, we had conversations around what we had heard (and not heard). We started to have ideas about how we could connect schools together, ideas about how we could consider structural changes, and ideas about how we could make this process stronger. What we found throughout this process was that smaller conversations with targeted questions for each priority really supported open, honest, and vulnerable conversations about where schools were succeeding, but also where they were struggling and in need of the most growth and support.

Once we returned from our visit rounds, Kurtis and Lorna Hewson from Jigsaw Learning led us through a process of reviewing and responding to our data that paralleled the collaborative team meeting structure used at schools. As we worked our way through each of the priority areas, we refined our meeting processes, reflected on how schools were engaging in their own Collaborative Response learning and implementation, and thought about our own divisional level responses to the issues and trends that we were identifying.

As we focused on lead indicators (formative, observable patterns of behaviour and practice), we also put in place structures for professional learning that would support growth for our school-based administrators and teams. Some of these structures were simple (resetting meeting norms as we returned to in-person administration meetings), while others were more complex (cycling professional learning opportunities). Recognizing that we had schools, administrators, and senior leadership with varying amounts of experience with Collaborative Response, we offered three differentiated professional learning sessions for school-based teams that would expand capacity and surface the learnings of our more experienced schools, while creating a common foundation and shared vision for further work.

We layered those against four “story of practice” sessions, where schools shared their work in the four priority areas to share celebrations and to learn from colleagues. We also embedded time into our administrative meetings on a rotating basis to facilitate inter school conversations around what was working (and not working) with

Collaborative Response as well as the priority areas. As a division, we were using Collaborative Response to deepen the Collaborative Response framework in schools! This time essentially filled the gap that our previous CIP meetings would have provided; however, the conversations, connections and future considerations that were a result of the collaborative time were far more fruitful.

Continuing forward into the 2022/2023 school year, we know that we are not yet done our work in creating and implementing divisional Collaborative Response. As system leaders, we feel that we are well on our way

to creating a dynamic structure that can be the vehicle by which we align our divisional priorities with actions at the school and district level, and to determine which ‘on the ground’ strategies we need to employ to the ultimate benefit of our students. ■

Carmen Larsen is the Director of Learning, Crystal Lothian is the Director of Support Services, and Aaron Skretting is the Director of Religious Education of Holy Spirit Catholic Schools Senior Administration, and Kurtis Hewson is Lead Learner/ Co-Founder of Jigsaw Learning.



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Building a Road Map **for** Continuous System Improvement

By Alexander (Sandy) McDonald, Grande Prairie Public School Division

A spring 2019 article in the *CASS Connection* described efforts in the Grande Prairie Public School Division (GPPSD) to develop a structured process to support personal and systemic growth and continuous improvement in the division. “How Can Simply Asking Questions Drive System-Wide Improvement?” described the context in the division and how a process of collaborative inquiry was developed to prepare for implementation of Alberta’s three new professional practice standards. This article reinforces the role of inquiry-focused growth planning to support and align planning in the division and adds additional details about how inquiry-based growth planning is embedded in practice to support staff and build stakeholder confidence in GPPSD schools.

Planning for the trip

The origins of the current GPPSD road-map began with support from the Alberta Research Network (ARN) in 2018. ARN support allowed GPPSD school and system leaders to work with researchers from the University of Lethbridge to build understanding of the new Teaching Quality Standard (TQS), Leadership Quality Standard (LQS) and the Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard (SLQS) and to explore how collaborative inquiry can be used to drive professional growth planning. Participation in this action research project was based on our belief that the most significant

school-based factor influencing student learning is the quality of the instruction students receive.

To support the growth of all certificated teachers in the division, Dr. Pam Adams, Dr. Carmen Momborquette, and Dr. Sharon Allan from the University of Lethbridge facilitated deep learning opportunities related to the practice standards for school and system leaders over the course of an entire school year.¹ The initial training also helped teacher leaders develop the skills to lead generative dialogue and to use specific evidence of student learning when building inquiry-based professional growth plans. The division also worked with school leaders and local teachers to structure embedded professional learning time for all teaching staff every month and actively championed the potential of collaborative inquiry as the structure for personal professional growth planning in the division.

Two other core elements are part of the theoretical framework for planning in GPPSD. The *Coherence Model* developed by the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University identifies that the most important work in the division is that which occurs in the instructional core, where teachers plan and engage to support all students to master the curriculum.² The *Theory of Action* model developed by the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington describes how evidence of the needs of teachers, students,

and school leaders is essential to identify the professional learning goals set by teachers, school leaders, and system leaders each year.³ These conceptual models were introduced in townhall meetings held at each school across the division and are consistently referenced in school and system meetings as essential concepts underpinning our GPPSD plans.

Setting off

The map school and system leaders are following is based on the growth planning processes established in our division. Generative dialogue between system leaders and school leadership teams regarding the ongoing work in their schools is scheduled monthly. In these conversations, school leaders review evidence of the needs of their students and their teachers and discuss the actions being taken to realize their goals.

The time commitment for these monthly meetings is significant, and is reflective of our belief; it is school leaders who are best positioned to support the professional learning of their teachers to ensure optimum learning for all students. Given the clarity that exists about what is most important, school and system leaders meet their time commitment and maintain focus on instructional leadership.

Checking our progress

Working to identify relevant sources of evidence to best measure progress, at the individual, school, or system level, is

challenging work. Alberta Education's new *Assurance Framework* and the focus of inquiry growth plans on student needs reinforce the need to engage in the challenging work with evidence. As GPPSD enters year two of our first three-year Education Plan under the new Assurance Framework, early indications are that the new structure and processes are beginning to yield promising results. Student outcomes are improving and in a spring 2022 survey of division teachers, 91 per cent

of the 300 plus teachers who responded expressed satisfaction with the amount and variety of feedback received from school leaders regarding their instruction.

GPPSD is also participating in a four-year longitudinal research project exploring the implementation of the TQS, LQS, and SLQS. As part of the *Optimum Learning for All Students* research, focus groups of teachers, vice principals, principals, and system leaders illustrated an unexpected benefit of the division's strategy.⁴ Participants identified inquiry-based growth plans, which remained a constant during the last two school years, served a supportive role to help teachers and teacher leaders remain focused on what was most important during the pandemic: staff and student wellness and continued student growth and achievement.

Adjusting course

Believing it takes a minimum of seven years for change to become deeply embedded and effective in practice, GPPSD is in

the intermediate stages of implementing our strategy. School and system leaders remain committed to refining processes, building understanding, and continuing to develop the knowledge and skills to maximize the effectiveness of inquiry-focused professional growth plans. Teams are currently revisiting the initial work sponsored by the ARN to refine processes and are continuing to use current evidence of student and staff learning to provide all students with optimum learning. The path ahead for GPPSD is clear and in focus and collaborative inquiry and professional growth planning is a core strategy for getting us there. ■

Alexander (Sandy) McDonald has been with the Grande Prairie Public School Division since 1991 and has been Superintendent of Schools since the 2015/2016 school year. A focus of his tenure as Superintendent has been supporting division staff through building the alignment of structures and planning at the school and division level.

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By Kelli Littlechilds, ASEBP

Welcome to a new school year – a chance to turn the page on the roller-coaster ride of the last two and a half years. I certainly could not have predicted the challenges that sudden school closures, a hard pivot to online schooling, and the waves of uncertainty would have on our minds, relationships, and well-being.

Now that we're through the thick of it, it's possible to appreciate the highs-and-lows of navigating the unpredictable and exploring the depths of our strengths and competencies. This autumn, as schools and district staff welcome students back to class, there is a familiar excitement and promise for the year ahead. Yet at the same time, I sense that this year also feels different. Our shared experience has inspired new pathways for collaboration and understanding, and we're stronger for it.

I genuinely believe that improvement and change is both a process and a goal: this journey is dynamic and therefore requires flexibility, especially from us as leaders. The same is true for how we set the course for our teams and organizations.

The pandemic has, in many ways, blurred the line between our professional and personal lives. And, for many, it's also shifted *what* we value or *how much* we value it. As leaders, we must respect these shifts and do our best to find solutions that balance employee and organizational needs. Here at ASEBP, that meant taking a hard look at in-office work pre-pandemic versus remote work during the pandemic – and examining how to find a new, better way of working that recognizes the role of employee experience in a positive workplace culture, and how respecting staff needs outside of work hours fits into this puzzle.

At ASEBP, I've seen the positive impact that a flexible, hybrid schedule can have on employees and that's why we started offering hybrid work options to our employees in May 2022. Encouraging employees to speak freely and bring their whole selves to work is so important, and while we must work a little harder to engage staff who are working remotely, our office operations have adapted, and our overall productivity has increased. Through this entire experience, I have learned that readiness is key – we must be ready to adapt to future uncertainties, ready to be flexible, and ready to make changes.

At the same time, I believe the prolonged uncertainty of the last several years has reinforced the importance of building

personal resilience and investing in mental, emotional, and physical wellness long before an individual faces a challenge or personal crisis. This approach requires all staff to take ownership over their wellness because when these skills are practiced regularly, it results in higher levels of positivity and stronger physical and mental health. As leaders, you can help bolster this message by sharing regular reminders of what ASEBP health benefits are available to your employees and their families.

My focus on strengthening ASEBP's services is driven by the expectations of our covered members to continuously improve and tailor our services to their health and wellness needs. Some of the ways ASEBP is moving forward this school year include:

- **Introducing virtual appointments:** covered members, including those enrolled in our MyRetiree Plan, can book an in-person consultation or schedule a call with an ASEBP benefit specialist via video or phone and get answers to their benefits and spending account questions. This provides members with more choices that recognize personal preferences and comfort levels.
- **Continuing to listen to covered members' needs:** ASEBP sent our first quarterly client satisfaction survey in March 2022. With over 11,000 covered members invited to participate, these pulse surveys will help us receive more timely feedback and adapt our services to emerging trends and member needs.
- **Reflecting on our practices:** the pandemic allowed us to examine our existing practices and increase access to digital resources

that better meet employer and covered member needs, including submitting electronic forms, creating more video content, and providing virtual training and meeting opportunities for leaders and district administrators.

- **Strengthening mental health and wellness support:** earlier this year, we examined our Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) provider options through a tendered process to determine whether our current offerings provide competitive, sustainable supports for school and district staff. As a result, on December 1, 2022, we will transition to a new EFAP provider, Inkblot, to increase accessibility to and opportunities for a range of counselling supports, and where covered members have the option to continue working with their Inkblot provider using their ASEBP benefits. In January 2023, ASEBP will further enhance our psychology benefit to include counsellors as eligible providers, adding more options for those seeking professional support.

- **Expanding the *It Takes a Village* wellness hub:** during the pandemic, we rolled out our *It Takes a Village* hub (www.wellness.asebp.ca) as a one-stop resource for ASEBP and community-based mental health support. Later this year, we intend to expand the scope of the hub, with information and resources that support overall well-being.

For me, the biggest personal lesson of the pandemic is that investing in self-care and wellness is not an indulgence, it's a necessity. And, here at ASEBP, I want to leverage what we do best – support system leaders and educational workers by listening to what they need to feel well and to help them find and access healthy supports.

As we continue to find our way forward in this post-pandemic era, I want to express my sincere thanks for everything you do, year after year, to support staff, students, families, and communities across our province. On behalf of everyone at ASEBP, I wish you and your staff health, happiness, and continued learning this school year. ■

Kelli Littlechilds is the CEO of ASEBP and has more than 35 years of experience in the health and benefits industry. As the leader of one of Alberta's Top Employers for 2022, Kelli is a champion for personal and workplace well-being.



A member of ASEBP's Human Resources team leads an office tour for employees hired during the pandemic. Planning for these tours went through many iterations due to changing COVID-19 case counts and public health measures. Photo courtesy of ASEBP.



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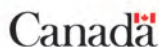
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