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Fall 2025

the CASS CONNECTION

The official magazine for the College of Alberta School Superintendents

Leading with Passion:

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Teaching and
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The CASS Connection

The official magazine for the College of
Alberta School Superintendents
Fall 2025

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Message from the **Minister of Education**

Demetrios Nicolaides | Alberta Minister of Education

As Alberta students ease into their back-to-school routines, so do our dedicated support staff, teachers, principals, and superintendents. The beginning of the school year offers a chance to reflect on the immense responsibility and privilege that comes with shaping young minds. Leading with Passion leaves a lasting impact: every lesson taught, decision made, and word of encouragement can inspire a student to reach new heights. It's an approach that breathes life into our classrooms and hallways, igniting enthusiasm and a sense of purpose that resonates far beyond academic achievement.

To lead with passion is to inspire curiosity, creativity, and resilience in our students. It is about showing genuine excitement for new ideas, embracing challenges as opportunities, and cultivating a classroom atmosphere where every student feels valued.

As Minister of Education and Childcare, and as a father, I understand the importance of creating safe, supportive and enriching environments where children can learn, grow and thrive. That's why Alberta Education and Childcare is leading with passion, driven by a vision of a world-class education system and a bright future for all students.

As the 2025-2026 school year begins, Alberta's government is reaffirming its strong commitment to students, teachers and schools. This year, the education budget reaches a record \$9.88 billion through Budget 2025 to fund the Early Childhood Services to Grade 12 education system; an unprecedented level of support aimed at setting both students and staff up for success. This funding

Lead with Passion, Inspire Curiosity

"As superintendents, you play a vital role in shaping the quality and direction of education within your divisions, while also making meaningful contributions to the success of Alberta's broader education system."

will provide schools with more resources, enable the hiring of more teachers and strengthen classroom supports to ensure every student receives the help they need, when they need it.

Beyond the classroom, we are making an \$8.6 billion generational commitment to build and modernize more than 100 schools in the next seven years. This investment reflects our dedication to ensuring that every child, no matter where they live, has access to high-quality learning spaces.

Many of these projects would not be possible without the leadership of The College of Alberta School Superintendents and its dedicated members.

As superintendents, you play a vital role in shaping the quality and direction of education within your divisions, while also making meaningful contributions to the success of Alberta's broader education system. Together, we have implemented new curriculum, strengthened early literacy and numeracy programs and expanded career-focused pathways, ensuring Alberta students are prepared to succeed in a rapidly changing world.

Thank you for your unwavering support in advancing education across our province. Your passionate leadership, dedication and advocacy are shaping a brighter future for Alberta's students and ensuring our school communities continue to thrive.

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Message from the President

Michael McMann | College of Alberta School Superintendents

Shaping the Future of Education

It is both an honour and a privilege to serve as the 61st President of the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS) for the 2025-2026 year. As we look ahead, I am deeply inspired by the collective strength, vision, and commitment of our membership. CASS continues to play a vital role in shaping not only the future of education in Alberta but also in contributing to national and global conversations on educational leadership and excellence.

Guided by our vision of *Leadership and System Excellence*, CASS remains steadfast in its mission: to empower system education leaders to ensure optimal learning for all students. This mission is not simply aspirational – it is the foundation upon which every decision, initiative, and partnership rests.

Our core values keep us grounded and ensure that our actions consistently reflect our commitment to students, members, and the broader public we serve:

- **Students are first:** We place student learning, growth, and well-being at the centre of all decisions and priorities.
- **Promotion of the public interest:** We are unwavering advocates for a strong and equitable public education system that serves all Albertans.
- **Respect for individual members:** We embrace professional collaboration and honour the diverse voices, experiences, and expertise of educational leaders.
- **Trustworthiness:** We lead with integrity, transparency, and a unified voice to strengthen confidence in system education leadership.

In the year ahead, CASS is committed to advancing Alberta's leadership in the pursuit of a world-class education system – one that inspires innovation, fosters resilience, and ensures that every student is equipped for success in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Our collective efforts will continue to position Alberta as a provincial and national leader in education.

This work is made possible through the strength of partnerships. At both the provincial and national levels, CASS collaborates with organizations such as the Alberta School Boards Association, the Alberta Teachers' Association, and post-secondary institutions. Together, we build capacity, advance professional learning, and ensure alignment between leadership, teaching, and system priorities. These partnerships enhance our ability to anticipate challenges, seize opportunities, and collectively ensure the success of every learner.

On behalf of the CASS Board of Directors, I extend my gratitude for your ongoing dedication to the students, communities, and systems you serve. I look forward to working alongside each of you as we build on our collective momentum and continue to lead with vision, integrity, and purpose.

With appreciation and commitment,
Michael McMann

CASS Board of Directors

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Heather Lynch: Penguins of Antarctica

An exploration of the abundance of life at the bottom of the world.

APR 20,
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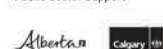
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Message from the Chief Executive Officer

David Keohane | College of Alberta School Superintendents

Where Passion Meets Purpose

The Victorian author John Ruskin stated that wherever love and skill mingle, expect a masterpiece. While social narratives about the current state of K-12 education may be full of stories of challenge and hardship, we know that focusing on these matters exclusively downplays the joy and rewards of teaching and system education leadership.

Teachers, principals, and system education leaders are central to shaping student engagement. Much research points to the reality that when students are excited and motivated by what they're learning, it's often because a teacher made the material come alive. Clearly, there is much at stake for students when inquiry into the education system does not point to techniques and strategic endeavors dedicated to making teaching and the programs that support it, labours of love.

This issue of *The CASS Connection* dives deeply into that idea. The theme, "*Leading with Passion: The Joy of Teaching and Learning in Alberta*," brings to the forefront the energy, imagination, and commitment that define our profession at its best.

Each feature reflects the spectrum of how joy is both sparked and sustained in Alberta schools. In Wolf Creek Public Schools, outreach settings are more than safety nets, they're launch pads. Superintendent Tim De Ruyck reminds us that when we meet struggling students with purpose and persistence, what begins as floundering can turn into flourishing.

In Calgary Catholic, student voices guiding the learning journey. Holly Schile and Dr. Bryan Szumlas demonstrate how centering student perspectives makes learning more meaningful, inclusive, and responsive. Engagement, after all, is most powerful when it's personal.

From the forests and meadows of the Rockies, Canadian Rockies Public Schools takes us outdoors, where teachers like Colleen Lee and Braeden Kelly are showing what happens when experiential learning meets cultural wisdom. There, curiosity becomes the curriculum.

The CAPE story is one of unwavering dedication. Teresa Di Ninno, Brian Celli, and Jeney Gordon offer a 30-year reflection on what happens when educators pour themselves into community, continuity, and care.

Cal Johnson's piece from Northland School Division reminds us that joy and connection go hand in hand. Reconciliation work, rooted in land, language, and relationship become a pathway toward something deeper and enduring for all learners.

In "Equalling Three," Dr. Clint Morozuk and Maureen Offenberger explore the idea that teaching, at its most profound, is grace in action. And in Edmonton Catholic, a shared sense of faith and purpose drives

powerful educational outcomes, celebrating how learning thrives when grounded in justice, wellness, and belonging. These articles are indeed indicators of a profession that remains vibrant, evolving, and deeply human.

In leadership, we often talk about strategy, policy, and system architecture – and rightly so. But this issue is a powerful reminder that joy is also a leadership priority. Rather than being ornamental, it's foundational. When we lead with passion, we create conditions where joy becomes possible, even within complexity.

To all our colleagues featured here, and to the countless other stories that echo theirs throughout our province, thank you for intentionally leading with the heart and with intention. Thank you for reminding all of us that Alberta's education system is at its best when love and skill do, indeed, mingle.

Let's continue creating masterpieces.

David Keohane

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Enabling ALL Students to Flourish:

The Power of Outreach Settings



Students celebrating the West Country Outreach School graduation. Photos courtesy of Tim De Ruyck.

By Tim De Ruyck, Wolf Creek Public Schools

Within Alberta the graded school system began long ago in the 1870's and is still used today as it is throughout many parts of the world. Over these last 150 years there have been ongoing shifts in focus within the realm of public education. "The political maneuvering in our province, country and around the world, the election of political leaders and the publication of various reports and texts since

the beginning of the 20th century provide a framework and context for the reforms to our education system."¹

As far back as 50 years ago, in the 60's and 70's, it was a time of social innovation and experimentation, where non-graded schools and individualized programming became a focus. This was also a time when "Human Capital Theory was widely accepted. The generally held view is that a society with formally educated workers will be more productive. There is an assumed relationship

between more education and increased earnings."¹ Since that time there has continued to be a pendulum effect, one with basic education and traditional teaching methods on one end of the swing and more individualized inquiry-based learning methods on the other. Like so many things, the sweet spot lies somewhere in the middle.

The entirety of my 30 years in public education thus far has occurred within rural settings. During that time much has changed in terms of the opportunities offered to



LEFT: The dedicated staff of West Country Outreach School.

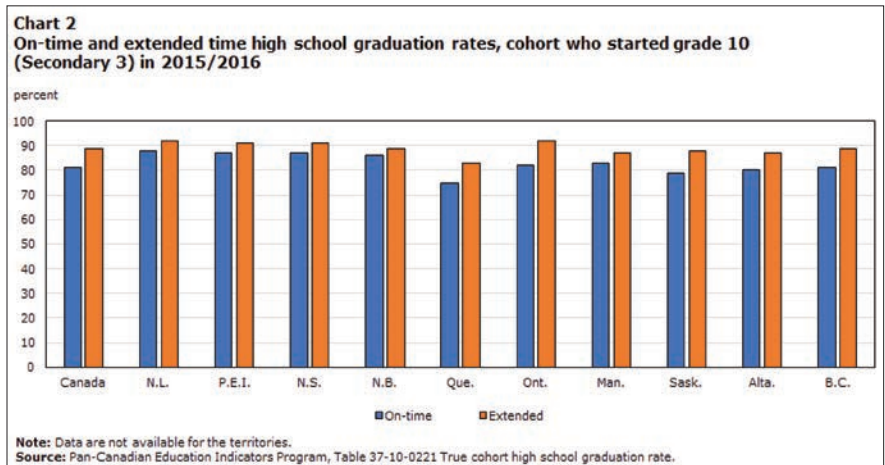
BELOW: The West Country Outreach School fall camp.



If we think of public education as an umbrella, with all that is offered to support students falling within it, we know it has continued to broaden over the years.

students beyond the walls of the traditional classroom setting, and as part of providing programming options for our rural students. Inclusivity has rightfully remained a strong focus. It has been wonderful to see this work continue to evolve, as it serves to promote student engagement as well as illuminate pathways for students towards fulfilling their various post-secondary aspirations.

While there are many examples of these opportunities, including dual credit, apprenticeship, work experience, and various locally developed course offerings within schools, the focus here will include shining a light on the great work which occurs in our Outreach Schools every day. Over the years I've known various titles for these settings, within this context however, Outreach refers to an alternative school setting for Grade 7 to 12 students that is separate and distinct from other traditional schools. Settings such as these are often also established within larger school environments, and both models can work well.



Even though we work tirelessly within all our schools to meet the needs of every student, and all truly embrace inclusivity, some students need something different for a variety of reasons. Some struggle to attend school punctually and regularly, some find the hustle and bustle of a larger school overwhelming and

stressful, some must earn income while continuing their education, some have children of their own, some are transitioning from home-schooling settings, as well as a variety of other circumstances where students need additional support. It is important to note that many of the students who find a home in Outreach

settings do not struggle academically. Rather, they are in need of programming which is individualized and established such that barriers can be overcome.

Within Wolf Creek Public Schools, we have three Outreach schools; one of which is West Country Outreach School. This school provides complementary programming for students in addition to what is offered within schools in the surrounding area. There are many success stories coming out of Outreach settings such as West Country Outreach School, and this success is based on several key principles:

- Staff have a strong sense of collective responsibility for the success of all students, and the collective efficacy in believing they are making a positive difference in the lives of students.
- A belief that all students can learn at high levels, be successful, and achieve goals which lead them to success in their adult lives.
- Relationships, connection, and sense of safety and belonging are of paramount importance.

Each fall the students of West Country Outreach participate in a three-day camp, a way to build a sense of community, establish new relationships, and build upon existing ones. "Relationships are at the core of all we do," says Alva Holliday, the West Country Outreach School Principal.

The pursuits of graduates from the West Country Outreach are as varied as their personalities. Examples include:

- Mechanical Engineering from the University of Alberta.

- Structural Engineering from the University of Alberta.
- MC College.
- Journalism from Mount Royal University.
- Environmental Science from the Olds College of Agriculture and Technology.
- Landscape Horticulturist from the Olds College of Agriculture and Technology.
- Canadian Military.
- Veterinarian Technician from the Olds College of Agriculture and Technology.
- Embalmer from Mount Royal University.

We know increasingly the road to high school graduation is not a straight line, and the number of students requiring more than three years for high school completion is significant. By giving students options such as Outreach Schools to complete their graduation requirements, we see very real increases in the number of students achieving graduation. The chart on page 11 illustrates that across Canada graduation rates increased from 81 to 89 per cent when considering students who remained in high school beyond three years.² In Alberta, it amounted to a seven per cent increase in students graduating.

If we think of public education as an umbrella, with all that is offered to support students falling within it, we know it has continued to broaden over the years. Along with academic support and a wide scope of extra-curricular opportunities, public school systems are feeding students, providing mental health support, support through School Social Workers, cultural connections through Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers, and a whole host of other clinical

and social services. In so many ways it makes sense for these services to be offered in schools, it is simply where the students are.

Outreach settings, such as West Country Outreach School, are not successful by their very existence. It requires a dedicated and passionate staff, sufficient resourcing, and strong relationships amongst the Outreach Schools and those they complement. It requires a deep philosophical understanding of the importance of this work, and the difference it makes every single day to our promising youth. ■

Tim De Ruyck is the Superintendent for Wolf Creek Public Schools in central Alberta. Finishing his 12th year as a Superintendent and 30 years in public education, Tim continues to have a strong focus on equity and enabling all students to thrive and succeed.

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The CASA Classrooms program is a proven model of school-based mental health care, developed by CASA and introduced in collaboration with Sturgeon Public Schools in Feb. 2023.

CASA Classrooms is in its third year of providing specialized treatment in a classroom setting for students in Grades four to 12. As of fall 2025, there are 25 CASA Classrooms across Alberta, and CASA will open three more in Feb. 2026.

Top Presenting Symptoms of CASA Classrooms Students



Allie - anxiety

Allie was struggling with getting to school regularly, making friends and completing her school work. Through her work in the CASA Classrooms, Allie was able to feel safe enough to come to school because of the smaller class size and the focus on helping her to regulate her emotions.

Allie learned more about her anxiety and how it got in the way of her friendships and school success. She built her confidence around how to manage her anxious feelings, make and keep friends and, through this increased confidence, saw academic improvements. With the support of her caregiver, the CASA team and her school, Allie was able to take these new ways of coping back to her own school.



James - emotional outbursts and behaviour issues

James was that kid that parents were reluctant to let their children play with. He was usually withdrawn and reserved, and then would have outbursts that often involved swearing and throwing things, for no apparent reason.

Through the work in the CASA Classroom, James was able to understand that his behaviour and outbursts were related to built-up emotions. He learned to understand and identify those emotions, learn new ways to express them and to ask for what he needed rather than using his behaviour. James was able to return to his school with renewed confidence, and his teachers had better understanding of how to support James to continue to be successful when his emotions got too big.



Devon - overactivity, poor attention and concentration

Devon was one of those kids who never sat still. They were always fidgeting with their pens, books and distracting others in the classroom by interrupting, talking to students during lessons and leaving the classroom unannounced.

Through Devon's time in the CASA Classroom, they were diagnosed with ADHD. They were also prescribed medication that helped Devon to "slow their brain down." Devon also was able to build more appropriate skills and behaviours through practice in the CASA Classroom and with their peers on the playground. Devon reports feeling more confident and less "scattered," and that they feel like they understand better how their brain works.

"When our daughter needed help, CASA Classrooms were a healthy space for her to learn and grow in. She gained a multitude of skills and tools to cope with emotional distress, while being academically successful..." - CASA Mental Health parent

For the 2023-24 school year, Classrooms students showed improved peer relationships (54%). Students showed reduced emotional and related symptoms (50%) and reduced disruptive, antisocial or aggressive behaviour (52%).

Since Feb. 2023, students in grades 4-9 showed at least one year of academic advancement during the CASA Classroom program, including improvements in writing (31%), reading (32%) and numeracy (51%).

84%

Eighty-four per cent of patients agree their experience in CASA Classrooms has improved their mental health

95%

Ninety-five per cent of caregivers agree their experience in CASA Classrooms has improved their child's mental health



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Learn more at www.casamentalhealth.org/classrooms

Elevating Student Perspectives for Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Education

By Holly Schile and Dr. Bryan Szumlas, Calgary Catholic School District

In recent years, Canadian educators and researchers have emphasized the vital role of student voice in shaping meaningful and effective educational environments. Research in Canada shows that student voice boosts engagement, leadership, and belonging.

Mertens¹ states involvement in decision-making improves motivation and outcomes. The Canadian Education Association² highlights that participation in governance develops key skills and recommends structures such as student councils for meaningful inclusion. Recognizing students as active participants rather than passive recipients, the Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD) created the Student Voice Committee to engage secondary students in discussions about the school board's priorities.

The Student Voice Committee features secondary students from every high school within the Calgary Catholic School District, providing a platform for authentic student input. These students collaborate with district leaders and the board of trustees to discuss issues related to faith formation, well-being, student success, and Indigenous education.

For example, the Student Voice Committee has provided feedback on assessment and re-assessment guidelines to better reflect varied learning styles and pathways to success. They also advocated for enhanced mental health support and peer mentorship opportunities. *"When we talked about mental health support, I felt like I was finally able to voice what so many of my friend's experience every day. It's not just about being heard – it's about creating real change,"* explained a Grade 11 student.

Students also stressed the importance of integrating Indigenous perspectives highlighted through active participation of the



ABOVE: Board Chair Shannon Cook. Photos courtesy of Bryan Szumlas.

RIGHT: Board Vice Chair Lori Iovinelli.

Truth and Reconciliation 94 Calls to Action and emphasized supporting partnerships with local Elders to enrich classroom learning. *"Learning from Elders opened my mind to different ways of understanding history and culture. Knowing what I know now, I feel it's important these voices are included in our education,"* shared a Grade 10 student, emphasizing the value of diverse perspectives.

The Student Voice Committee places strong value on learning about the Calgary Catholic School District's organizational structure and the important role played by the board of trustees in guiding the district's vision and mission. Through direct



engagement with trustees and district leaders, students gain valuable insights into governance complexities and the diverse operational realities present in schools across the city.

Notably, the presence of Grade 10, 11, and 12 representatives from each CCSD high school ensures that a rich array of perspectives – shaped by unique school cultures and personal lived experiences – informs each discussion and data collection. *"I like that our opinions aren't just asked*

for but actually impact what will happen in my school,” remarked one Grade 10 representative, reflecting the sense of agency fostered through committee participation. Productive and informative dialogue is encouraged through clear guidelines based on Singleton’s Four Agreements:³ staying engaged, speaking their truth, experiencing discomfort, and expecting and accepting non-closure, allowing ideas to be shared with candor and empathy.

While the benefits of student voice initiatives are clear, authentic implementation requires careful planning. Risks include tokenism, where student input is superficial and does not lead to real change. To mitigate this, transparent processes are necessary to express how student feedback informs policies.

“Before joining the committee, I didn’t realize how much thought and planning goes into district decisions. It’s eye-opening to be a part of that process,” said a Grade 11 participant.

By actively listening to student voices, CCSD demonstrates a recognition that students’ insights can improve school climate, address systemic inequalities, and promote student agency. Regular committee meetings and advisory roles ensure that perspectives and understandings influence key decisions and the district’s overall culture in areas such as the district calendar, reassessment practices, programming, and resource allocation.

Canadian research underscores that elevating student voice is essential for modernizing education, fostering democratic participation, and creating inclusive and culturally responsive school communities. “We all come from different schools and backgrounds, but in the committee, we learn to listen first, and then share honestly. It builds trust between us,” shared a student leader from Grade 12.

The Calgary Catholic School District’s Student Voice Committee serves as a compelling model of how schools can authentically include students in shaping their educational experiences. Guaranteeing that students’ voices are heard and valued not only improves individual well-being and success but also strengthens the fabric of education in Alberta, preparing students for active civic engagement beyond the classroom. As one student summarized, “Being part of the Student Voice Committee has helped me realize that we all have the power to make

school better – not just for ourselves, but for those who come after us.”

The Student Voice Committee has been instrumental in helping achieve the mission and vision of CCSD: *Living and Learning in our Catholic Faith, so that STUDENTS centred in CHRIST realize their full potential.* ■

Holly Schile, M.Ed., is the Director of Arts and Culture for the Calgary Catholic School District. Bryan Szumlas, Ed.D., is the Chief Superintendent for the Calgary Catholic School District.

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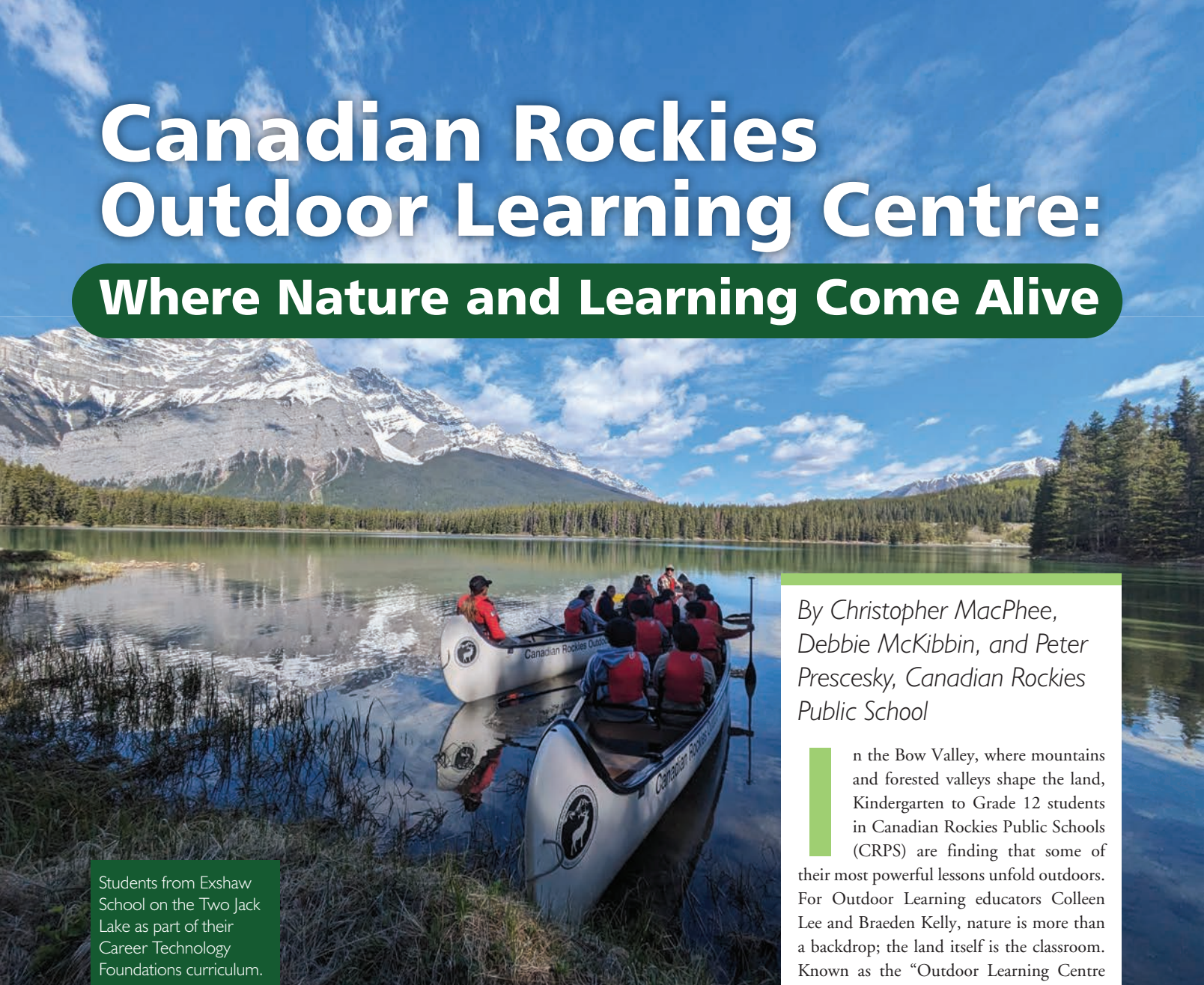
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Canadian Rockies Outdoor Learning Centre: Where Nature and Learning Come Alive



Students from Exshaw School on the Two Jack Lake as part of their Career Technology Foundations curriculum.

By Christopher MacPhee, Debbie McKibbin, and Peter Prescesky, Canadian Rockies Public School

In the Bow Valley, where mountains and forested valleys shape the land, Kindergarten to Grade 12 students in Canadian Rockies Public Schools (CRPS) are finding that some of their most powerful lessons unfold outdoors. For Outdoor Learning educators Colleen Lee and Braeden Kelly, nature is more than a backdrop; the land itself is the classroom. Known as the “Outdoor Learning Centre or OLC,” this approach brings learning to life through hands-on experiences rooted in curiosity, connection, reflection, and purpose.

CRPS Superintendent Christopher MacPhee and Deputy Superintendent Debbie McKibbin have seen the program grow from modest beginnings into a thriving division-wide experience, thanks in part to the financial support of the Wim and Nancy Pauw Foundation. Several times a year, students are afforded the opportunity to be immersed in activities like collecting water samples to test for bacteria, building structures using a variety of materials, or designing boats to test buoyancy.

“The OLC represents a powerful reimagining of how the curriculum can meet the needs of the whole child,” said McKibbin. “It gives students room to grow in every



The Wim and Nancy Pauw Wilderness Experience (WimWe) program designed for Grade 10 students across the division. Photos courtesy of Peter Prescesky.

direction – not only academically but emotionally, socially, and spiritually.”

The program began with community interest and educator vision. Lee recalled parents at Banff Elementary requesting more nature-based learning. That small spark led to a division-wide initiative extending across Exshaw, Canmore, and Banff. “I remember a kindergarten student who’s now in Grade 8 asking, ‘Miss Lee, how many adventures have we had over the years?’” she said. “It reminded me that we’re not just building knowledge, we’re building relationships too.”

Students routinely express surprise and delight in learning outdoors. One student told Lee, “I can’t believe this is school.” Another said it was exactly what they needed for their mental health. Lee shared that a Grade 2 student once whispered, “When I’m older, I want to be a teacher like you and do outdoor learning with my students.” Parents often echo the sentiment, saying they wish they’d had the same opportunities growing up.

What makes OLC especially effective is its strong connection to the Alberta curriculum. A walk through Grotto Canyon ties into Grade 4 science and social studies by not only exploring stories of Indigenous people on the land but the natural resources and connections that continue to allow them to thrive. Atop Sulphur Mountain, weather observations lead to data collection and prediction. “I’ve probably memorized most of the science outcomes from Kindergarten to Grade 6,” Lee laughed.

Kelly builds lessons around curricular themes, often creating math challenges from natural materials or tracing eagle migration routes to support mapping outcomes. “If I’ve used up my science ideas, I turn to social or math,” he said. “The outdoors offers endless entry points.”

Equally vital to the experience are the contributions of CRPS Knowledge Keepers Virgle Stephens, Ollie Benjamin, Tracey Stevens, and Cassandra Poucette. The outdoor days begin with an offering of tobacco and a moment of reflection. Through stories, games, and shared walks, students are invited to consider the sacredness of water and plants and what it means to protect something not just as a resource but as a relative. “When Knowledge Keepers speak, students listen with a different kind of attention,” Kelly said. “There’s deep respect.”

Lee and Kelly also support teachers, preparing students with pre-trip activities and reinforcing learning post-visit. One Grade 3 group created field guides of native plants in class and then used them in the forest to

“We see teachers reinventing their practice. And we see a generation growing up grounded in the land, in learning, and in the values that will carry them forward.”

Students hiking down from C Level Cirque as part of the Wim and Nancy Pauw Wilderness Experience (WimWe).





High school students learning avalanche skills and rescue techniques from experts at Lake Louise Ski Resort in Banff, Alberta, as part of the Winter Travel program.

identify species and trace their roles in local ecosystems. Another joint field day between two schools was preceded by a letter exchange and virtual meet-and-greet, building relationships before the group explored shared water systems together.

Environmental responsibility is a natural outcome of repeated outdoor learning. In early years, students develop wonder. As they grow, they explore protected areas, human impact, and conservation. Eventually, they contribute to stewardship, clearing trails, observing wildlife, and partnering with groups like Friends of Kananaskis. “We’re not just visitors in nature,” Kelly said. “We’re part of it, and that comes with responsibility.”

For teachers wanting to begin, Lee offers simple advice: “Start small and start personal. Even a grassy field becomes a classroom if you bring intention to it. Nature is near.” Kelly recommends beginning with something you love and building lessons from that interest. The goal isn’t perfection; it’s consistency.

The OLC is more than a program. It’s a movement that connects students to curriculum, community, and themselves. “We see students engaged, joyful, and deeply curious,” said Superintendent MacPhee. “We see teachers reinventing their practice. And we see a generation growing up grounded in the land, in learning, and in the values that will carry them forward.” ■

Christopher MacPhee is the Superintendent of Schools, Debbie McKibbin is the Deputy Superintendent, and Peter Prescesky is the Outdoor Learning Centre Coordinator, for Canadian Rockies Public Schools.

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A Labour of Love

By Teresa Di Ninno, Brian Celli,
and Jeney Gordon, CAPE

The sense of disbelief was palpable! Why, after nearly 10 years of retirement, would I even consider returning to work? Well, the answer lies in a small charter school nestled in the heart of Medicine Hat, Alberta. It is a school that truly focuses on meeting the academic and personal needs of each student, a school where people really count. All it took was one visit and I was hooked. Following her recent tour of the school, the Premier of Alberta reflected on her visit saying, "...it is so calm and focused and comfortable here," almost the same words I used after my first visit.

Well, it has now been six months since I went back to "work," and I have loved every minute of it! What follows is the remarkable story of the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) Public Charter School, a 30-year labour of love that has produced a truly marvelous learning space in which there really is a place for everyone. (Brian Celli)

In 1994, CAPE's personalized, integrated, flexible, responsive learning environment was launched to address the unmet needs of students with diverse and unique profiles, especially the gifted and twice exceptional. Our first-year cohort consisted of these students, which became our experimental group, allowing us to test various pedagogies; the project approach, cross curricular teaching and learning, expansion of concepts

to challenge, adding relevance through experiential hands-on teaching and learning, and application of this learning within the local and global community. A small, dedicated and passionate staff explored, learned, planned, failed, and celebrated together. Parents were extremely involved. With such a small group, everyone stepped up.

The very first Alberta Charter Schools Regulation was dropped on my desk by a still unknown individual in early February of

1995. It seemed obvious that our school fit the criteria, and, with the support of parents and staff, the first charter document took shape. We were granted our first charter in September 1995, making CAPE one of the first three charter schools in Alberta. Our population exploded and we got to work adapting the original concept to meet the needs of a much more diverse and larger population. What a moment it was when we realized that the program was as effective in



"Over the years, as word spread, CAPE has outgrown two buildings and is currently looking for a third, a facility that will better support our program and the uniquely diverse student population we continue to serve."

supporting this broader new group as it was with our first cohort! Enrolment grew and so did the staff.

As a new teacher, what attracted me to CAPE Public Charter School in 1995, was not just its philosophy but more so the way it was implemented. For thirty years, the work in this small charter school has provided me with immeasurable experiences and opportunities to learn and grow as an educator and a person within a collaborative community of life long learners; classroom teacher, gifted education programmer, schedule maker, year-plan coach, literacy and numeracy researcher, program designer, AISI coordinator, article author, PD presenter, human resources mentor, and principal educator to name only a few. This investment has had profound returns for me. (Jeney Gordon)

As our population grew ever more diverse, we responded by refining our program and processes to include a Kindergarten class, a Grade 4 through 9 gifted strand, and tiered literacy and numeracy programs by acquiring new knowledge and skills as student needs arose, by becoming adept at creative problem solving to do the seemingly impossible with practically nothing, by securing the services of an educational psychologist, by encouraging and supporting professional development within the staff. The school hummed with enthusiasm!

CAPE's students have and continue to flourish. They are scattered across the world, in extremely diverse careers, each pursuing their personal goals. They give back to the school and the community, they contribute positively to society and the world. In short, they have become good people and good citizens.

Over the years, as word spread, CAPE has outgrown two buildings and is currently looking for a third, a facility that will better support our program and the uniquely diverse student population we continue to serve.

The school still hums with the excitement of learning, like my little friend that routinely comes oh so very eagerly to the lab to ask math questions. Even though CAPE has been my 30+ years labor of love, it has also been one for each and every staff member. It has been a true collaborative effort by the amazing people who, over the years, have collectively and individually positively impacted the lives of so many CAPE students and the families who entrusted them to our care. I know that CAPE will continue to support its students and encourage life-

long learning and the pursuit of personal and academic excellence, ethical citizenry and the development of respectful and respectable members of society. ■

Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is an alumnus of McGill University and the University of Toronto. Teresa began her teaching career in Alberta in 1980. She is the founder, past principal and, for the last 19 years, the superintendent of CAPE Public Charter School in Medicine Hat, Alberta. Teresa has just retired after 45 years in public education.

Brian Celli, B.Ed., M.Ed., CEC, is an alumnus of U.B.C. He began his teaching career in Fox Creek, Alberta, in 1988, and retired as the Superintendent of Wild Rose School Division. He recently "unretired" to join CAPE as the new Superintendent.

Jeney Gordon, B.F.A., B.Ed., Diploma of Vis. Com., is an alumnus of the University of Lethbridge. She was born and raised in Medicine Hat. She started her teaching career at CAPE in 1995 and spent all but three of those years teaching there. Jeney has been the principal of CAPE Public Charter School for the past 19 years.



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Connections that Support Truth and Reconciliation in the Northland School Division Three Year Education Plan

By Cal Johnson, Northland School Division

For a long time, education plans were built around what we thought communities needed. That is no longer the case. Communities are now telling us what matters most to them, and Northland School Division is listening.

When the division launched its new Three-Year Education Plan, the first version of Priority One was called Connections Supporting Reconciliation. During the second year of community engagement, people told us something was missing. Elders, Knowledge Keepers, families, and students said the word “truth” needed to be there. Reconciliation cannot happen without it.

We made the change. The priority is now called Connections that Support Truth and Reconciliation. That shift shows that feedback matters and the direction is right. Communities are helping lead the way, not just responding to it.

The journey began with listening

In 2023 to 2024, Northland School Division hosted engagement sessions at every school. These conversations invited families, students, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and staff to share their experiences and ideas for the future of education. The feedback was collected and used to create the first set of What We Heard reports. These reports became the foundation for the Three-Year Education Plan.

In 2024 to 2025, the division returned to each school and asked communities what they had noticed since the last visit. The questions focused on changes in student engagement, relationships between



ABOVE: (L to R back row): Troy Tait, PSBAA Executive Director and CEO; Cal Johnson, Superintendent of Schools/CEO; Wally Rude, Ward 8 Trustee (Calling Lake); Robin Build, Vice-Chair; Dennis McNeil, PSBAA President. (L to R front row): Tanya Fayant, Board Chair; Lorraine McGillivray, Ward 1 Trustee (Paddle Prairie); Jesse Lamouche, Ward 4 Trustee (Grouard and East Prairie Métis Settlement).

RIGHT: Northland School Division student Ariel Gladue-McLeod, from St. Theresa School, who participated in the Cultural Days in Wabasca-Desmarais. Photos courtesy of Curtis Walty.

schools and communities, programming, and student supports. The division also asked what communities thought should come next. That feedback led to updated What We Heard reports and small but meaningful changes in the second year of the plan. Changing the Priority One title was one of them.



"Connections that Support Truth and Reconciliation" is not just a line in a plan. It is a commitment.

Learning from Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and youth

To help guide this work, Northland School Division created two advisory councils. The Superintendent's Elder and Knowledge Keeper Council brings cultural teachings, history, and spiritual guidance into planning and decision-making. The Superintendent's Youth Council gives students a direct way to share what school feels like for them and how decisions and actions shape their experience.

These councils are not just about engagement. They are part of how the division makes decisions. They bring experience, honesty, and perspective that cannot be found in a spreadsheet or a planning document. They help make sure that change is meaningful and grounded in what people are living every day.

Honouring land, language, and relationships

This priority also strengthens the connection between education and the land. In many of the division's communities, the land is more than a location. It is part of the learning. Schools are weaving land-based learning into daily life, ceremonies, and student activities.

Language is another key focus. The division continues to expand programs in Cree, Dene, and other local languages. Language is part of identity and pride. It lives in classrooms, on signage, in announcements, and in school events. It is not just something students learn. It is something they live.

Building strong relationships with families, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers is also central. Schools are creating space for local knowledge and community voices. The goal is not to lead communities but to walk beside them.

Sharing with education leaders across Alberta

Northland School Division shared its journey at the 2025 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Gathering, a conference hosted by the College of Alberta School Superintendents. During the presentation, the division spoke about how the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action helped guide the direction of the Three-Year Education Plan. The presentation also highlighted how community conversations shaped the plan and how voices from across Northland are helping lead the work.

By sharing this experience with other school divisions, Northland is helping show what it means to build a plan that reflects the strengths, goals, and values of the communities it serves.

Recognized across the province

In spring 2025, Northland School Division received the Promoting and Advancing the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Award from the Public School Boards' Association of Alberta. The award recognizes leadership in education that brings reconciliation into everyday practice.

This recognition belongs to everyone who has taken part in the journey. That includes students, families, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, staff, and school leaders. It honours the relationships that have been built and the work that is still to come.

A commitment we carry forward

"Connections that Support Truth and Reconciliation" is not just a line in a plan. It is a commitment. It reflects the strengths and voices of the communities Northland School Division serves. It is about language, land, trust, and identity. ■

Cal Johnson is the Superintendent of Schools and Chief Executive Officer for Northland School Division. He brings over 30 years of experience in education across three provinces. Since joining Northland in 2016, Cal has served as a Principal, Associate Superintendent, Acting Superintendent, and is now Superintendent/CEO.



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Audacious Hope:



*By Dr. Clint Moroziuk and
Maureen Offenberger,
Greater St. Albert Catholic
Schools*

When Teaching Becomes Grace

How dare we? How dare educators return each September with a spring in our step, brimming with optimism? This job is hard and growing harder every year. Yet somehow, the challenges and sorrows of the school year ahead are embraced with anticipation rather than dread. How can this be? And yet here we are, not just hopeful, but audaciously hopeful about the year to come. Some of the bumps and bruises from last year may still be tender, but we stand a little taller, ready to walk into a new school year with confidence. It will

be good. It will be beautiful. We know this because when educators come together, collaboration and complementarity become grace in action. Not only do we get the job done, but we also accomplish the impossible... together.

Schools reveal themselves time and again to be living communities of resilience and compassion. Diverse personalities work almost unconsciously in harmony: one colleague anticipating another's need, one gift compensating for another's weakness. A whispered "I can't manage this right now" is answered by a steady "I've got this." Teaching and nurturing are not reserved only for students; they extend

richly to staff. Each teacher's expertise is the fruit of countless colleagues who have poured knowledge, encouragement, and creativity into one another for the good of students and the well-being of peers. This generous exchange keeps our practice dynamic and our hope alive.

As leaders and teachers, we recognize these daily acts of solidarity as the heart of education. They are why we strive to foster learning environments filled with joy and belonging. In every school, the ordinary is transformed: laughter lightens burdens, colleagues support one another, kindness multiplies energy, and a quiet word of

encouragement provides strength when it's most needed. It is here, in this web of belonging, that our shared values come alive. Grace is not simply a theological concept; it can be understood as a gift that is unearned, abundant, and meant to be shared widely.

This year, the wider community reflects on what it means to be "pilgrims of hope." Educators know this pilgrimage well. Each September, we shoulder our bags, carry our crosses, and set out again on the road of teaching and learning. What sustains us is the promise that we do not walk alone. Every school year is a journey toward growth, marked by companions who lift us when we stumble and cheer us when the road grows long. We can look to the left and to the right to see those who understand us and champion us as we move forward.

Our students, too, are pilgrims of hope. They arrive with questions, doubts, laughter, and dreams. They learn that their journeys are never solitary, for they are guided by teachers who walk alongside them, and by a community that delights in their every step. In walking together, educators and students alike, we discover anew that learning is not a possession but a path, and that wisdom is revealed most powerfully when it is shared.

In all schools, staff are seen and known by colleagues and leadership. This recognition takes on unique significance in the context of belonging. Gifts and talents are affirmed, struggles are shared, and burdens carried together. This freedom to be authentically oneself creates the conditions for resilience and strength – the very qualities on which our students rely. Colleagues become more than friends; they are family, woven into a tapestry where every strand contributes to a larger picture. The golden thread that runs through is shared grace.

What is true for students is true for educators: education transforms. Our schools are places where staff grow as much as students, where the extraordinary is found in the ordinary, and where, when we cooperate with one another, and with the quiet promptings of the Spirit, learning and life abound. This is the audacious hope that sustains us: the belief that together, with a touch of grace, we can accomplish more than we ever thought possible.

If you know, you know. And we are so very glad we do. ■

Dr. Clint Moroziuk is the Superintendent of Schools, and Maureen Offenberger is a teacher for the Greater St. Albert Catholic Regional School Division.

In walking together, educators and students alike, we discover anew that learning is not a possession but a path, and that wisdom is revealed most powerfully when it is shared.

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Rooted in Faith, Growing Through Collaboration:



A teacher helping students solve a problem. Photos courtesy of Edmonton Catholic Schools.

Optimal Learning at ECSD

By Lynnette Anderson, Ryan Freehan, and Terri Peterson,
Edmonton Catholic School Division

At Edmonton Catholic School Division (ECSD), the joy of teaching and learning is more than a guiding principle, it is a lived experience, deeply rooted in faith, hope, and the power of human connection. Each day, within our vibrant school communities, we witness moments that affirm our shared purpose: acts of compassion, courageous conversations, and the quiet triumphs of students and staff growing together. These moments are not incidental; they are intentional acts of service aimed at

optimal learning. In this article, we share how ECSD exemplifies Optimal Learning as a living process rooted in faith and inspired by hope. We also explore how our Collaborative Stewardship Groups ensure that transformative teaching and learning is not only foundational, but also life-giving and life-inspiring thereby preparing students to engage meaningfully with the greater world.

ECSD's Executive Leadership Team (ELT) helps transform teaching and learning by sustaining an open and collaborative environment that encourages division-wide cohesion. The ELT has nine members, comprised of six

superintendents, a Chief Facilities and Technology Officer, a Chief Financial Officer, and a General Counsel. Each of the six superintendents is assigned to a group of approximately 15 schools, which are called Stewardship Groups.

Part of a superintendent's role is to work with their Stewardship Group, and both support the school-based administrative teams as well as gather school-based feedback. Stewardship Group meetings and school site visits incorporate data sharing and discussions to celebrate successes and collaborate on strategies for continuous improvement. This solutions-focused process helps ensure a common set of Optimal Learning Conditions for each of our 51,000+ students.

In *School Reform from the Inside Out: Policy, Practice, and Performance*, Richard



Staff collaboration on strategies for continuous improvement.

Elmore¹ explains how pedagogy is more likely to be substantially transformed in a large number of schools if done from the inside out. The collaborative process within our Stewardship Groups is an example of Elmore's "inside out" approach to pedagogical transformation, which in our case is aimed squarely at Optimal Learning. To this end, our superintendents engage with the school-based leaders in their Stewardship Group to better understand, in the words of Michael Fullan, "...what works ... and what doesn't." These engagements align expectations for student learning, define the pedagogical practices that foster such learning, and ensure the Optimal Learning Conditions are in place for these practices to thrive.

For example, school-based visits and collaborative engagements helped the staff at Saint Augustine Catholic Elementary School explore what was working well in their school, and what was not. Through this process, they identified the need for a school-wide focus on literacy. Staff then employed research-based reading intervention strategies and differentiated instruction to tailor lessons and create pathways to individual reading success.

This focus helped provide clarity and challenge within an environment where students celebrate learning. In addition, data was collected to create student groups for targeted intervention. These intervention groups received 30 minutes of daily support, resulting in notable improvements in student literacy across all grade levels,

but most especially among grade one at-risk learners, who demonstrated significant gains from September to January. In short, Saint Augustine's collaborative approach to pedagogical transformation increases joy and academic rigour to make students feel more known, challenged, and supported.

Learning experiences at the intersection of joy and academic rigour spark student curiosity and the desire to learn. At ECSD, joy and rigour are part of our nine Optimal Learning Conditions. The other conditions are Catholic faith permeation, well-being and Catholic spiritual formation, creativity and risk taking, ownership of learning, applied and collaborative learning, assessment and feedback, real-world connections, and lifelong learning. These conditions anchor ECSD and align our work by placing students at the centre of teaching and learning.

The heartbeat of ECSD echoes the rhythms of our Catholic faith and a shared commitment to Optimal Learning. The full formation of our students in spirit, mind, and body is foundational to our mission, which is anchored in Catholic social teaching and a continued focus on overall student and staff well-being. As Dr. Santiago Rincón-Gallardo reminds us, "*Learning is a practice of freedom.*"² This belief resonates deeply within ECSD, where learning goes beyond the transmission of knowledge, to become a living process rooted in faith, freedom, and hope. Indeed, our collaborative Stewardship

Groups ensure that transformative teaching and learning is not only foundational but also prepares students to live fully and to serve God in one another. ■

Lynnette Anderson is the Chief Superintendent of Edmonton Catholic Schools, bringing nearly 30 years of dedicated service in education. Lynnette is deeply committed to fostering student success by creating inclusive, faith-filled learning environments where every student is empowered to thrive.

Ryan Feehan serves as Superintendent of Leadership Services for Edmonton Catholic Schools. Holding a doctorate in Educational Leadership, Ryan is dedicated to developing leaders by cultivating strong school leadership and fostering collaborative learning environments.

Terri Peterson is Superintendent of Learning Services with Edmonton Catholic Schools, bringing over 35 years of dedicated service to inclusive education and professional development. She leads with a commitment to faith-based learning and student success.

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At ASEBP, we are united by one common purpose: supporting covered members' health and well-being as the benefits provider of choice for Alberta's education sector. This purpose guides each decision ASEBP makes and reflects a deep commitment and passion for supporting those who dedicate their lives to teaching and learning.

We believe that when education workers and school divisions are supported in optimizing their individual and organizational health, it leads to more engaged educators and better learning environments for students. This belief is embedded into our culture and drives our compassionate, customer-focused approach.

A governance structure rooted in education

ASEBP was created by the Alberta Teachers' Association (ATA) and the Alberta School Boards Association (ASBA) and has a deep understanding of the challenges and opportunities present in the education sector. Established more than 55



*By Jocelyn Plakas-Lock,
Interim Chief Executive
Officer, ASEBP*

years ago, ASEBP was created specifically to serve the needs of the education sector and has continuously evolved to align with this mission.

ASEBP is governed by 10 Trustees, evenly appointed by our founding organizations. They set ASEBP's mission, values, and strategic direction, create and make

changes to benefit plans, set premium rates, establish adequate reserves, and invest the funds of the trust. Through their leadership, ASEBP continually refines our approach to improve, maintain, and protect our covered members' overall wellness.

As an Employee Life and Health Trust, ASEBP operates as a not-for-profit organization, unlike traditional insurance providers. Any profits gained from premiums or investment funds are reinvested into the Plan to benefit covered members and offset premium costs. ASEBP is not accountable to shareholders or driven by corporate profits, so ASEBP Trustees can focus their attention and efforts on the needs of Alberta's school employees. This plan structure also provides flexibility to subsidize future rates or amortize losses over a longer period.

Sustainability measures focused on continued support

Sustainability will always be a focus for ASEBP leadership. We understand the trust placed in us to manage resources responsibly and want to continue supporting

covered members well into the future. ASEBP understands the impact of premium increases and values transparency, sharing key drivers such as inflation and plan utilization, along with our third-party actuary valuation every year.

Sustainability measures include ASEBP's: Experience Adjustment System approach to pooling rates that addresses inequities in claims experiences; Sick Leave Support program that provides active case management and return-to-work planning; Employee and Family Assistance Program provided at no

additional cost to employers; Therapeutic Alternative Reference Pricing encouraging cost-effective prescribing for common medical conditions; generic substitutions for prescriptions drugs and a managed formulary. ASEBP is committed to a cost vs. premium balance with a goal to keep the plan competitive and ensure its sustainability.

Innovative and strategic leadership

To ensure we are meeting our mission, ASEBP continuously adapts based on

feedback from stakeholders and looks for new ways to engage and support covered members. The educational landscape continues to evolve and ASEBP's goal is to align with industry needs and processes as closely as possible. By providing coverage to 97 per cent of the education sector, ASEBP uses data to analyze plan performance, utilization, and remain responsive to changing needs.

ASEBP's new strategic plan, the Journey to 2030, highlights this commitment to improvement and sustainability as a trusted, innovative partner for Alberta's public education sector. Building on past successes and momentum, ASEBP looks to:

- Continue meaningful communication and engagement with covered members and stakeholders.
- Expand access and enhance prevention strategies to improve the health and quality of life of covered members.
- Increase the plan's sustainability through administrative efficiencies and look for strategic ways to reduce plan and system costs.
- Deepen ASEBP's reputation as a high-performance not-for-profit organization.

On a personal note, I have had the pleasure of working exclusively in the non-profit industry throughout my career. I am passionate about purpose-driven work and leadership in non-profit organizations so joining ASEBP was a natural extension of my values, aligned to meaningful service and community impact. I am proud to continue supporting ASEBP's mission and helping to create healthier, more vibrant learning communities across Alberta. ■

Jocelyn Plakas-Lock is the Interim Chief Executive Officer at the Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP), overseeing daily operations of the organization and ensuring its alignment with the strategic direction. She has more than 25 years working in the not-for-profit sector, with 15 of those years being in the benefits industry specifically. Jocelyn holds a Bachelor of Science with Specialization in Psychology from the University of Alberta and a Master of Social Science (Human Services) from the Queensland University of Technology.



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