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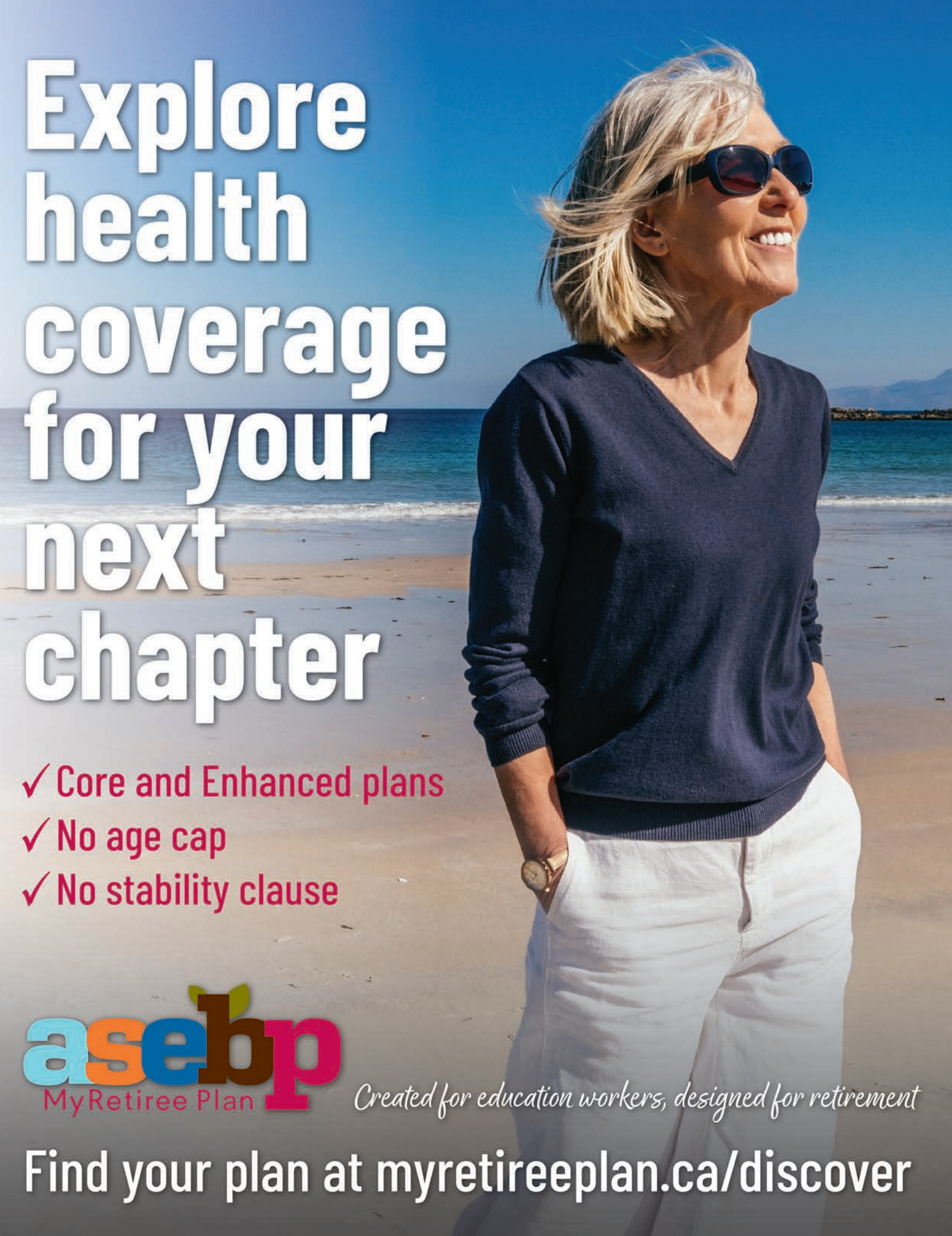
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Message from the
Minister of Education and Childcare

Demetrios Nicolaides | Alberta Minister of Education and Childcare

Back to More for Alberta Classrooms

A new school year brings new opportunities for students, teachers, school leaders, and support staff. This year, back to school means back to more: more teachers, more classroom support, more space to learn, and more opportunities for students to succeed.

Alberta's classrooms are growing, and student needs are becoming more complex. We have heard these concerns clearly. That is why Alberta's government is focused on bringing more qualified teachers and support staff into classrooms while maintaining high standards for the profession. this year, we introduced four faster and more flexible teaching certificate pathways. These pathways recognize the qualifications, and experience people already have while making sure new teachers are ready to succeed in Alberta classrooms. Developmental and Conditional Teacher Certificates are also allowing eligible students and teachers to being teaching this school year with support from experienced educators.

These efforts are backed by a record $10.8-billion investment in education through Budget 2026. This funding will help school authorities hire more than 1,600 teachers and over 800 educational assistants and support staff. Back to school means more people in classrooms helping students learn and helping teachers do what they do best.

We are also putting more support where it is needed most. Using data from more than 108,000 classrooms across 1,549 schools, we are adding 699 complexity teams in schools with the highest levels of student need. A new class size reduction grant will support K-9 classrooms facing the greatest enrolment pressures. Stronger literacy and numeracy screening will also help identify young students who need extra support earlier.

> "Your leadership supports teachers, strengthens schools, and creates more opportunities for every student to reach their full potential."

Back to school also means more space to learn. Through the $8.6-billion Schools Now program, we are building and modernizing schools across Alberta. Budget 2026 supports 40 new school projects, and there are now 159 active projects across the province. Since the program began, 16 projects have been completed and 74 have received accelerated approvals.

None of this work would be possible without Alberta's superintendents. Your leadership supports teachers, strengthens schools, and creates more opportunities for every student to reach their full potential.

Thank you for your continued partnership and leadership. Together, we are making sure that back to school means back to more for Alberta students: more support, more space, and more opportunity.

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Message from the President

Reagan Weeks | College of Alberta School Superintendents

Supporting, Trusting, and Empowering Education in Alberta

Learning across Alberta public education relies on clear direction, intentional support, and strong leadership in every school community. The Fall 2026 edition of *The CASS Connection* focuses on the direct impact instructional leadership has on student success, equity, and overall well-being. Across our province, system leaders and educators work daily to transform provincial curriculum expectations into meaningful, high-quality learning experiences tailored to the unique needs of local classrooms.

The stories of practice featured in this issue highlight deliberate efforts happening across system authorities. School divisions are building collective capacity through targeted middle years learning, disciplined evidence informed inquiry, equity focused literacy and mathematics initiatives, and collaborative curriculum implementation models. From small group reading instruction and school-based coaching to structured leadership formation, these efforts illustrate how intentional system design fosters collective teacher efficacy and measurable academic growth for all students.

System leadership requires creating the conditions where educators feel supported, trusted, and empowered to refine their practice. When school authorities prioritize coherent curriculum implementation plans and shared responsibility, students reap the benefits through increased engagement, mathematical fluency, reading comprehension, and a stronger sense of belonging.

We invite you to explore these articles and reflect on how these evidence-informed practices can inform your own authority context. We look forward to continuing these important conversations in person at the upcoming Learning Conference on November 4-6, 2026. Thank you for your continued dedication to advancing educational excellence and supporting every learner across Alberta.

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Message from the Chief Executive Officer

David Keohane | College of Alberta School Superintendents

Where Instructional Excellence Begins: Leading the Conditions for Student Success

As research like the Provincial Multi-year Optimum Learning for All Students study (March, 2023) conveyed, the strongest performing school systems do not leave instructional excellence to chance. They create the conditions in which excellent teaching can be learned, supported, examined, refined, and sustained.

That idea runs throughout this issue of *The CASS Connection*. While the stories shared by Alberta school authorities reflect different contexts and approaches, a consistent pattern is evident: meaningful improvement is built through disciplined attention to evidence, purposeful professional learning, collaborative leadership, coherent curriculum implementation, and a clear focus on student needs. Across the issue, we see examples of data-informed improvement, equity-based analysis, literacy and numeracy development, curriculum implementation, coaching, collective efficacy, and system-wide professional learning.

For the College of Alberta School Superintendents (CASS), this matters because system education leadership must ultimately influence what students experience in classrooms. The role of superintendents and other system leaders is not to prescribe every instructional decision. It is to establish the conditions in which strong professional judgment can flourish: clarity of direction, access to evidence, opportunities for collaboration, effective professional learning, appropriate supports, and an expectation that adults will continue learning in service of students.

CASS leverages professional learning to be applicable to the *Teaching Quality Standard*, *Leadership Quality Standard* and *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard*. These standards reinforce the reality that for a school authority, professional practice within the classroom, school, and system may be different within its respective areas of influence, but it is always complementary with its focus. Leadership requires continuous attention to how system priorities are translated into the daily work of schools and classrooms. CASS' Continuing Education Program, communities of practice, and other supports, are intended to help regulated members make that translation with confidence and coherence.

Instructional excellence, then, is much more than a classroom aspiration. It is a system responsibility. It depends upon leaders who can connect evidence to action, policy to practice, and professional learning to improved outcomes for students.

As we all gather within professional learning for the year, I hope that the stories you read about in this issue take you beyond the simple question, *"What are we asking teachers to do?"* but, encourage you to address *"What conditions are we creating so that excellent teaching can take root, spread, and endure?"* When system leaders keep that question at the centre of their work, instructional excellence is not an initiative. It becomes part of the culture of the system – and enables students to be the beneficiaries.

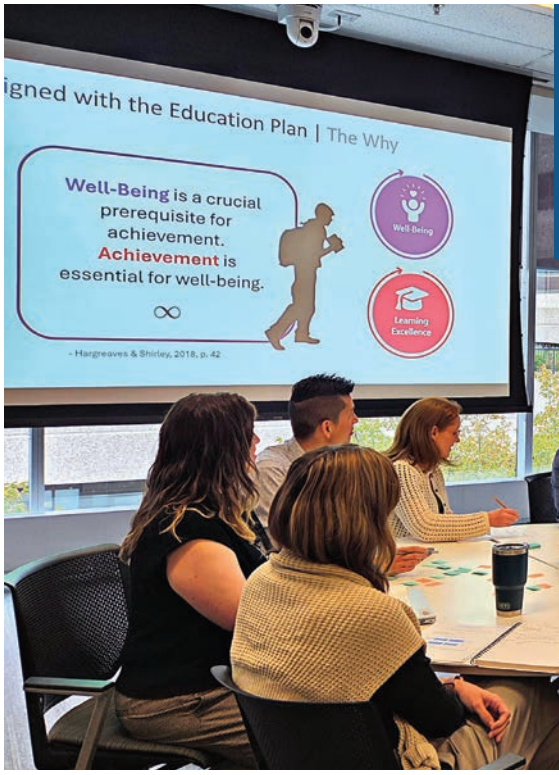


From Data to Impact:
Strengthening Learning Excellence and Well-Being in the Middle Years



By Joanne Pitman, Jennifer Turner, Michael Nelson, Ann Ard, and Andrea Sarson, Calgary Board of Education

The middle years represent a critical period in students' development, as young adolescents navigate significant cognitive, social, emotional, and physical changes while encountering increasingly complex academic expectations. During this time, students develop identity, independence, relationships, and belonging, conditions that profoundly shape their capacity to learn and achieve. As Hargreaves and Shirley remind us, "well-being is a crucial prerequisite for achievement. Achievement is essential for well-being."[1] This reciprocal relationship suggests that well-being and achievement cannot be considered separate outcomes; rather, they are mutually reinforcing conditions for effective learning.



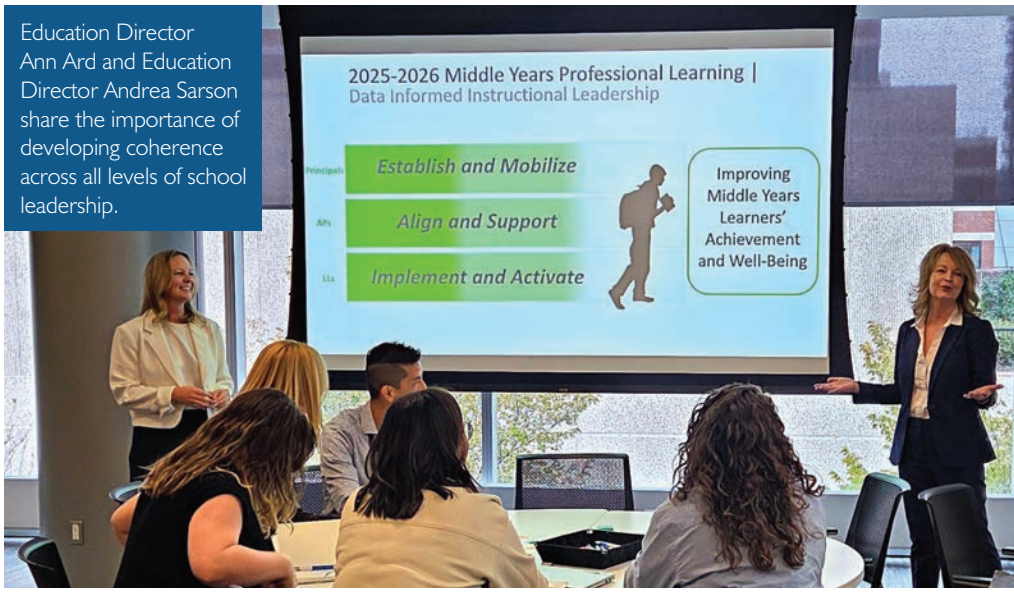


Superintendent Mike Nelson and Superintendent Jenn Turner highlight the connection between the Middle Years professional learning series and the Calgary Board of Education Three-year education plan. Photos courtesy of Joanne Piman.

This principle is reflected in the Calgary Board of Education's (CBE) Three-Year Education Plan and middle years professional learning series, which identifies two actions focused on middle years learners: the consistent application of continuums of support to implement evidence-based, targeted literacy and mathematics interventions, and the continuation of social-emotional supports through targeted programming, structures and processes. For schools, this means looking beyond whether students are achieving to understand the conditions that enable them to learn, belong, and thrive.

The 2023 Alberta Education Assurance Survey identified an area for growth in CBE's overall safe and caring measure, with the most significant decline among students in Grades 4-9. This evidence reinforced the importance of understanding the developmental needs of middle years learners and the conditions that support learning and well-being. As Immordino-Yang et al. explain, "the science on how the brain develops helps explain why young people's social, emotional, and academic development are intertwined."[2] In response, a three-year middle years professional learning series was designed to strengthen learning excellence and well-being. The first two years evolved from developing a deeper understanding of adolescent learners and brain development to building school-based leadership capacity to identify student needs, monitor outcomes, and respond through intentional, targeted supports.

At the center of this learning sits the question: What does it mean to know learners and monitor their growth? This inquiry supported a shift from identifying concerns to developing a more precise understanding of learners and translating evidence into responsive instructional action. This approach aligns with research emphasizing



Education Director Ann Ard and Education Director Andrea Sarson share the importance of developing coherence across all levels of school leadership.

educational settings where adolescents have "strong relationships with adults who know them well"[2] and where instruction and supports can be personalized to student needs.

A critical component in the work is differentiating professional learning for principals, assistant principals, and learning leaders. As Timperley et al. state, "developing coherence involves aligning the focus of improvement work across all levels of the school."[3] This design recognizes that effective intervention requires shared leadership. Each role contributes differently to creating conditions in which evidence can be used effectively. Targeted intervention is not a single program or isolated response; it is an ongoing process shaped by the conditions leaders establish, the evidence teachers gather, and the instructional adjustments made as students' needs change.

For principals, learning emphasized creating conditions for school-wide intervention, aligning evidence and data analysis with School Development Plan priorities, and establishing structures for data collection, progress monitoring, and coordinated learner support. Assistant principals focused on collaborative team structures, adolescent development, and connecting student needs with system resources in literacy, English as an Additional Language, and well-being. Learning leaders focused on classroom implementation, including learning environments, relationships, responsive instruction, and targeted interventions. Together, these differentiated roles create a coherent leadership approach in which evidence informs action at every level.

Leading indicators suggest positive impact. Combined results from the 2025 Alberta Education Assurance Survey, OurSCHOOL Survey, and CBE Student Survey highlight growth in well-being, with increases of seven to 12 percentage points across four themes: diversity and inclusion, school connectedness and belonging, regulation, and resilience and mental health. As the work moves into its third year, the focus



continues to be on building professional capacity of leaders and teachers. The next phase will maintain a focused emphasis on targeted interventions, with additional resources, assessment tools, and mathematics-specific strategies to strengthen schools' capacity to respond to identified learning needs with greater precision.

In complex middle years classrooms, targeted intervention is not an add-on; it is part of creating the conditions for learning excellence and well-being. CBE's middle years professional learning reflects a deliberate move from data to impact, supporting schools to know learners more deeply, monitor achievement and well-being intentionally, and design targeted interventions that respond to identified needs. Most importantly, it positions data as a means, not an end: use evidence to better understand learners, guide responsive action, and strengthen the conditions that support student achievement and well-being. ■

Joanne Pitman has served as Chief Superintendent of Schools for the Calgary Board of Education since March 2024. An accomplished educational leader with experience as a superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, and teacher, she has led system-wide initiatives focused on student achievement, equity, well-being, and evidence-informed decision-making.

Jennifer Turner has served as Superintendent of School Improvement for the Calgary Board of Education since June 2024. As a former chief superintendent, assistant superintendent, principal, teacher, and registered psychologist, she brings extensive leadership experience advancing student achievement, well-being, inclusive education and equity through effective assessment and targeted intervention.

Mike Nelson has served as Superintendent of School Improvement for the Calgary Board of Education since June 2024. He has held numerous leadership roles across the CBE, including education director, Human Resources director, principal, and system principal. His work focuses on student achievement, equity, well-being, instructional leadership, and the effective use of technology in teaching and learning.

Ann Ard, an Education Director with the Calgary Board of Education, brings over 25 years of K-12 experience across urban and rural boards, public and charter systems, and two provinces. She specializes in assessment, curriculum, and professional learning, leading connected system thinking with a practical focus on student learning.

Andrea Sarson, is an Education Director with the Calgary Board of Education, bringing extensive leadership experience in curriculum, assessment, and professional learning. She leads system-wide work in literacy, numeracy, and well-being, with a focus on educational improvement and student success.

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Supporting Instructional Excellence Through Equity-Based Analysis to Action

By Dr. Owen Livermore, Nancy Petersen, and Soleil Surette, Edmonton Public Schools

In 2021, Edmonton Public Schools conducted a multi-year examination of division achievement results in literacy and numeracy that revealed a concerning achievement gap for students from high socially vulnerable communities. The data signaled the importance of an intentional, strategic response. This initiated the development of an evidence-based action plan to improve literacy and numeracy skills across a cohort of 41 elementary schools, leading to the creation of the Equity Achievement Project (EAP).

The plan was informed by key research, including the OECD report, "Promising Practices in Supporting Success for Indigenous Students" (2017), and the book *Turning High-Poverty Schools Into High-Performing Schools* (Parrett & Budge, 2020). Foundational to the project was the concept of shared leadership and responsibility for improved outcomes and saw school leadership working collaboratively with key central leaders and content specialists. The division's story offers some key insights into how taking an evidence-based collaborative approach can elevate a positive culture in support of student success.

The project prioritizes high-impact instructional practices, regular monitoring for growth, and the development of students' self-efficacy as readers, writers, and mathematicians. While the EAP has evolved over five years, its core pillars remain constant: designated lead teachers, targeted professional learning, and active communities of practice (CoPs) for lead teachers and principals. The overarching goal of this project is the support of student learning, leading to improved academic outcomes for our most vulnerable students.



Professional learning

Increasing teacher confidence and capacity in research-based instructional strategies is a fundamental aspect of the project. It is essential that all teachers experience positive self-efficacy to be able to leverage a range of classroom instructional processes that enable them to be responsive to the individual learning needs of each student. Meeting students where they are at in their learning is critical to students experiencing growth.

In support of this work, the EAP Literacy and Mathematics Frameworks have two key outcomes:

1. To build teacher capacity in Tier 1 (universal) classroom instructional processes that research indicates supports learning in literacy and mathematics.
2. To support teachers in the application of these instructional processes and routines across the EAP schools so that there is common language and common practices from grade to grade and school to school.

Lead teachers

In partnership with principals, lead teachers are the champions of the EAP literacy and mathematics frameworks at their schools. They serve as a peer coach, mentor and resource for the other teachers through their learning classrooms. They attend regular EAP PL sessions and are supported through a literacy or numeracy CoP, which provides opportunity for collaboration and coaching to dig deeper into key instructional practices and their application in the classroom.

Learning classrooms

In the EAP model, a learning classroom is a classroom in which the content from the PL and CoP sessions are explored and implemented by the lead teacher with the intent of then sharing that learning across the school. Capacity is built over time by developing a strong foundation in the learning classroom and then extending practices to other classrooms through:

- Coaching and professional learning within the school community.
- Interclass visitations to the learning classroom.
- Collaborative planning and co-teaching in colleagues' classrooms.

Collaboration

The success of this project is a shared responsibility within and across schools and central teams. Collaboration occurs across participating school communities with support from the literacy and numeracy specialists. Additionally, EAP principals have the opportunity to meet as a cohort several times a year in a CoP that includes key central staff. The CoP typically combines an introduction to relevant ongoing research, an analysis of data and updates on the work of lead teachers in their CoP. Principals have the opportunity to relate the research to their context, share triumphs and opportunities, and seek feedback from colleagues.



Equity Achievement Project Classroom. Photo courtesy of Edmonton Public Schools.

Creating a culture of growth and high expectations

The shared responsibility central to this project, as seen in the CoPs, the learning classrooms and the professional learning, reinforces a culture of rigor, growth and high expectations. This extends to include teacher expectations and the belief that all students are learners. Supporting growth mindsets in students and teachers, student agency and learner identity are key elements in improving academic outcomes. Building school environments that combine challenge, agency, motivation and success encourages positive belief in students around their ability to thrive in their learning.

A growth mindset creates conditions where:

- Approaches are multifaceted and reciprocal.
- Staff believe they can teach all students.
- Staff believe their students are learners capable of growing.
- Students believe in themselves as learners.

Recognizing that believing in one's ability to learn serves as an early indicator for academic growth, the division developed Learner Identity Self-Reflections for reading, writing, and mathematics. These tools help students build self-efficacy and their belief in their ability to succeed, by promoting awareness of their identities as readers, writers, and mathematicians. Gathering baseline data on student perceptions helps teachers understand and support their students' learning journeys and encourages students to articulate their strengths and challenges, enabling rich teacher-student conversations and providing actionable insights to drive targeted instructional support.

Conclusion

Now entering its sixth year, the ongoing evaluations of the project have demonstrated its positive impact. Student achievement data reflects progress, learner identity reflections show growth in student self-perception and resilience, and EAP teachers report higher professional confidence in their ability to meet the learning needs of their students. Together, these results demonstrate



the power of a shared vision built on evidence-based high-impact instructional strategies, collaboration, and student engagement. ■

Dr. Owen Livermore is a Research Consultant with Edmonton Public Schools. He is a member of the Strategic Division Supports team, engaging with school leaders, Division leadership, and community partners to collect, analyze, and report on research efforts that support teaching and learning and promote evidence-based decision making. Owen utilizes his background in qualitative research with a specialization in media studies to support the implementation and evaluation of Division initiatives, manage research partnerships, and provide an evidence basis for strategic planning.

Nancy Petersen is the Executive Director of Strategic Division Supports and Division Support Services at Edmonton Public Schools, bringing over 35 years of dedicated experience to the division. Holding both a Bachelor of Education and a Master of Educational Leadership, Nancy has cultivated a deep understanding of the educational landscape through a progressive career path. Her work is focused around continuous improvement initiatives, setting and reporting on the Division's strategic direction, research and evaluation, administrative regulation development and establishing strategic partnerships that enhance student success and well-being. Through examining educational research and monitoring Division data Nancy has the opportunity to explore a range of initiatives in support of enhanced student success and ongoing improvement in Division outcomes.

Soleil Surette joined the Edmonton Public Schools in November 2018 with a background in evidence-based practice from health research and public libraries. Deeply committed to student achievement, she has contributed to the Equity Achievement Project since its inception, bringing to this work the weaving together of data, research and evaluation.











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January 25 & 26, 2027 | 10:15am
Dive beneath the waves to learn how coral reefs support ocean life.

Earth After Dark with Babak Tafreshi
March 15, 2027 | 10:15am
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A Systemic Approach to Implementing New Curriculum and Strengthening Instructional Leadership Through Systemic Alignment

By Mike Wake, Wanda Fonteyne, and Kristien Holtby, Wetaskiwin Regional School Division

This story of practice highlights a school authority's efforts in advancing learning for all students through a detailed, coordinated curriculum implementation plan and a systematic focus on strengthening instructional leadership. It demonstrates how intentional structures and processes, collaborative professional learning, and supportive conditions are creating equitable, high-quality learning environments that improve teacher practice and student success.

The Wetaskiwin Regional School Division (WRPS) used the implementation of Alberta's new elementary curriculum as an opportunity not only to introduce new content, but also to strengthen instructional leadership, improve system coherence, and align teaching, assessment, and professional learning across the division.

During the 2021-2022 school year, WRPS recognized that new Language Arts and Mathematics curricula would soon be implemented, even though the final documents had not yet been released. Rather than waiting for the curriculum, the division

System leaders determined that strengthening teachers' and administrators' understanding of the science of reading would provide an essential base for future curriculum implementation.



developed a comprehensive implementation plan focused on building a strong pedagogical foundation. System leaders determined that strengthening teachers' and administrators' understanding of the science of reading would provide an essential base for future curriculum implementation.

In December 2021, division leaders met with school administrators to outline this approach and build collective commitment. Administrators supported the plan, and WRPS partnered with Dr. Miriam Ramsey and Dr. Michelle Bence from the University of Calgary to deliver a six-part professional learning series between January and June 2022. This learning focused on evidence-informed literacy instruction and established a common instructional language across the division.

The implementation plan was guided by two primary goals: ensuring teachers were confident and competent in implementing the new curriculum, and equipping administrators to lead curriculum change with confidence. These goals shaped a multi-year strategy that prioritized collaboration, responsiveness, and instructional leadership.

A central feature of the implementation was bringing together teachers who taught the same grade. During curriculum support sessions, teachers compared the former and new curricula, examined the structure and design of the new documents, and collaboratively developed implementation plans for their first year of instruction. These sessions helped teachers become familiar with both the curriculum architecture and the new learning outcomes while also reconnecting colleagues after the isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To extend collaboration beyond scheduled sessions, WRPS established same-grade teacher communication groups, encouraging teachers to continue sharing resources, ideas, and questions throughout the year. This network of professional support strengthened collegial relationships and created a culture of collaborative problem-solving across schools.

The division intentionally designed professional learning to be responsive to teacher feedback. At the conclusion of every curriculum session, participants identified what additional support they needed. This feedback directly informed the planning of subsequent sessions. Teachers consistently identified time as their greatest need, noting that scheduled curriculum sessions alone would not provide sufficient opportunity to build confidence with the new curriculum.

In response, WRPS adapted its Professional Learning Community (PLC) structure. While mornings continued to focus on school-based collaboration, data review, and planning, afternoon learning opportunities were expanded to include dedicated curriculum implementation sessions. Many teachers chose these sessions, providing additional time to deepen curriculum understanding, collaborate with colleagues, and develop instructional resources.

Recognizing that effective implementation also depended on strong instructional leadership, WRPS embedded Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment (CIA) discussions into every monthly administrators' meeting. These standing agenda items provided school leaders with ongoing learning about instructional strategies, curriculum expectations, and assessment practices that mirrored the professional learning teachers were receiving. This consistent leadership development strengthened administrators' capacity to support implementation within their schools.

As implementation progressed, the division's focus naturally evolved. Initial efforts concentrated on understanding the design, organization, and content of the new curriculum. Over time, attention shifted

toward creating greater consistency in assessment practices and using assessment data to monitor student learning. Division leaders recognized curriculum implementation as an opportunity to strengthen assessment literacy and establish reliable local measures of student achievement.

To support this work, WRPS introduced a quarterly instructional review process during the 2024-2025 and 2025-2026 school years. Every school administrator met with senior leadership to review progress toward the priorities outlined in the division's Three-Year Education Plan while examining student achievement data from their respective schools. These structured conversations provided a comprehensive system-wide picture of implementation and helped identify both strengths and areas requiring additional support.

Insights from these reviews led to the development of school and divisional results dashboards. Designed collaboratively with system leaders throughout the 2025-2026 school year, these dashboards provide timely information about student achievement across the four core subject areas. Beginning in 2026-2027, administrators will have access to monthly achievement data, allowing them to monitor progress throughout the year rather than relying solely on year-end results. This data will inform school improvement planning, monthly leadership discussions, and quarterly instructional reviews while supporting timely intervention for students.

Throughout the implementation journey, one strategy remained constant: bringing same-grade teachers together to learn collaboratively. Teachers consistently reported feeling more connected, supported, and confident through these opportunities. The experience also reinforced that successful curriculum implementation cannot be viewed as a single-year initiative. Instead, it requires a deliberate, multi-year commitment that aligns professional learning, instructional leadership, collaborative structures, assessment practices, and data-informed decision-making.

By approaching curriculum implementation as a system-wide improvement strategy rather than simply introducing new curriculum documents, WRPS strengthened instructional practice, enhanced leadership capacity, and established sustainable structures that continue to support improved student learning across the division. ■

Mike Wake is the Superintendent for Wetaskiwin Regional School Division and has 50 plus years as a learner in the capacity of a student, teacher, system leader.

Kristien Holtby serves as the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services for Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools. In this role, Kristien is the executive leader of the Learning Services department, overseeing specialized learning supports, inclusive education programs, and student services across the division. Grounded in a student-centered approach, Kristien actively leads system-wide initiatives such as the Collaborative Response Model, collaborates with multi-disciplinary teams and community partners, and supports educators to foster inclusive, safe, and supportive learning environments for all students.

Wanda Fonteyne is the Retired Assistant Superintendent of Student Achievement for the Wetaskiwin Regional School Division. Wanda has served in the field of education for 36 years and retired from the role of assistant superintendent with Wetaskiwin Regional School Division in June of 2026. She has always had a passion for supporting students, families, and staff in the interests of student success.

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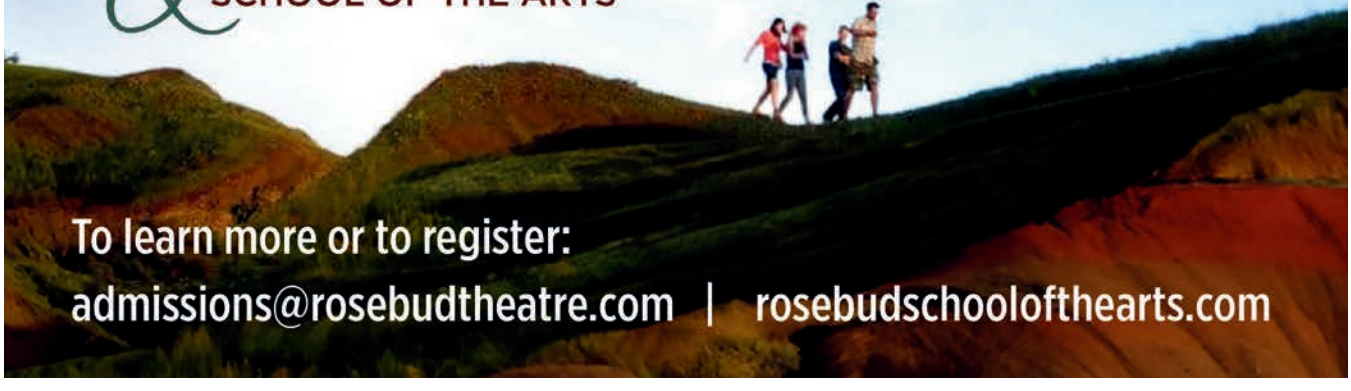


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From Shared Language to Shared Practice:



By Lynnette Anderson, Dr. Ryan Feehan, and Terri Peterson, Edmonton Catholic School Division

Advancing Optimal Learning Through Collective Responsibility

Across Alberta, school authorities are striving to create learning environments where every student can thrive. At Edmonton Catholic Schools, we are learning that improving instruction is more than creating and implementing another guidance document. While frameworks, strategic plans, and professional learning opportunities provide important direction, our work in Optimal Learning is ultimately about strengthening practice together.

It is a living process rooted in faith, shaped by collaboration, and sustained through shared responsibility for student success. This article represents the next stage of that journey. Earlier work established the "why" and the "what" of Optimal Learning. This year, the introduction of the Optimal Learning Working Group (OLWG) is helping us explore the "how" of system improvement: how instructional practice becomes visible, how evidence informs ongoing refinement, how student voice shapes our decisions, and how schools learn with and from one another as we advance student success.

Our division's vision for Optimal Learning strengthens unity across the system through clear expectations, and a collective commitment to student success. In previous *CASS Connection* issues, we described how the Portrait of a Graduate and the Optimal Learning Conditions define what we hope to cultivate in every learner.[1, 2] These efforts established clarity about what matters most for student learning. Yet clarity alone does not improve outcomes. The next challenge is translating those aspirations into consistent learning experiences for students across classrooms and schools. Our focus has therefore shifted from defining Optimal Learning to supporting its enactment across the division while respecting the unique context of each school.

This work is grounded in a clear set of Optimal Learning Conditions that place students at the centre and calls us to design learning experiences that balance joy and academic rigour, strengthen well-being, and foster meaningful, real-world learning opportunities. Together, the Optimal Learning Conditions and Portrait of a Graduate provide a foundation for instructional decision-making and a shared vision for learner growth. Educators draw on this alignment to co-construct learning experiences, respond to student needs,

and engage students more intentionally as active participants in their learning. In practice, this means building common understanding across classrooms and schools, strengthening coherence in instruction, and ensuring that learning is both purposeful and responsive. The question, then, is how these aspirations move beyond theory and become visible, consistent practices within classrooms and schools.

The OLWG was created to move ideas into practice through a collaborative, evidence-informed approach that places schools, educators, leaders, and students at the centre of continuous improvement. Rather than treating implementation as something done to schools, the model recognizes that meaningful change occurs when educators help design, test, refine, and share effective practices. This approach responds directly to feedback from leaders and teachers who emphasized the importance of authentic examples and continuous learning.

Through this process, we are learning that sustainable improvement emerges through collaboration, inquiry, and iterative cycles of learning rather than large-scale implementation efforts. Rather than focusing on compliance, the OLWG creates opportunities for educators to learn alongside one another as practices evolve and improve.

Eighteen OLWG school teams were selected through a self-nomination process demonstrating readiness, curiosity, and commitment to engaging deeply in the work. Together, these schools serve as living laboratories where instructional practices are explored, tested, refined, and shared. Most importantly, this structure reflects the Division's belief that professional learning is strengthened when educators learn with and from one another while collectively refining practice.[3]

The foundation of the OLWG structure are the interconnected design principles of co-construction, iterative learning cycles, testing ideas before broad implementation, student voice, and shared leadership. Together, these principles reinforce collective responsibility for student learning and create a culture where improvement is everyone's work. This culture of improvement maintains unity and ensures that we remain authentically responsive to the needs of students and educators. A distinctive feature of the OLWG is that the work is action oriented. Teams will co-plan, co-teach, test ideas in real classrooms, and refine their approaches based on evidence and reflection. Each school engages the work within its own context, while contributing to a broader, shared understanding across the system. These principles come to life most clearly when educators make their practice visible and invite others into the learning process.



Students in the Foods classroom at Mother Margaret Mary Catholic High School receive instruction during a hands-on culinary lesson. Photos courtesy of Edmonton Catholic Schools.



Educators from Monsignor Fee Otterson Catholic Elementary/Junior High School Collaborative as part of Edmonton Catholic Schools' Optimal Learning Working Group, co-constructing, testing, and refining practices that strengthen learning across the division.

Also central to this work is the concept of open practice. Classrooms become spaces for both student and professional learning. Schools participate in intervisitations and classroom walkthroughs using observation protocols to guide discussions on optimal learning conditions and to examine practice in authentic contexts. Learning is not intended to remain within the participating schools. Stories of practice, instructional tools, reflection protocols, student voice artifacts, and leadership insights are shared through principal meetings, instructional leadership sessions, department gatherings, and intervisitations. Schools are encouraged to share both successes and lessons learned during implementation. This transparent process builds trust, deepens professional learning, and reinforces a shared responsibility for student success. These principles

become visible through open practice, where learning is shared rather than isolated.

While collaboration among educators drives improvement, student experience remains its most important measure. A critical element of the OLWG is remaining focused on our Portrait of the Graduate, ensuring students remain at the centre of our work. Optimal learning cannot simply be designed for students; it must be experienced and validated by them. To ensure student voice is meaningfully reflected, the OLWG will develop, test, and refine structured conversation protocols that help schools better understand students' learning experiences through questions such as: What helps you learn best? What makes learning meaningful? What do you need more of? Student feedback informs instructional decisions, learning environments, and system decision-making. Students will also contribute to the language, resources, and artifacts that help define optimal learning across the division. By embedding student voice cycles and strategic communication into the process, student perspectives remain central to ongoing improvement efforts.

Through the OLWG, we are learning important lessons about leading system-wide instructional improvement. Shared vision creates coherence, but practice changes when educators have opportunities to learn together, test ideas in authentic contexts, and examine evidence of impact. Student voice deepens that learning by helping us understand how our decisions shape the learner experience. Above all, we are learning that lasting change occurs when those closest to the work help shape it. System improvement is ultimately about people: relationships, dialogue, and collective learning creating the conditions for something new to take root.[4] ■

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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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Willow Park School students building with blocks. Photos courtesy of Laurette Woodward.

Centering Reading Comprehension across Subject Areas:



Calmar Elementary students in the library.

A Systemic Approach to Disciplinary Literacy

By Michael Borgfjord and Nicole Lakusta, Black Gold School Division

For over a decade, K-12 literacy research has made one reality clear: reading comprehension cannot be siloed within the English Language Arts classroom. The shift toward disciplinary literacy proves that the cognitive demands of reading a historical primary source differ vastly from decoding a complex mathematical word problem or a dense scientific lab report. To achieve systemic success, a school division must commit to purpose-driven literacy across curricula, building a culture where high expectations are paired with inclusive support to aim for 85 per cent benchmark proficiency by 2030. This article outlines the pathway that Black Gold School Division has taken to drive systemic academic growth based on a recent, large-scale initiative spanning elementary schools through to high school.



Dansereau Meadows students in 2025.



Students from École Horizon Heights School.

The Pedagogical Framework: Moving from Philosophy to Practice

To shift school culture, divisional leaders must move beyond simply telling teachers that "everyone is a literacy teacher" towards a comprehensive agreed upon shared beliefs and understandings of what this means. The system challenge is not what to adopt, but how deliberately we design learning tasks, use technology, integrate AI, communicate expectations, and support staff and students.

Our work looked to align practices from the grassroots classroom to school and divisional leadership teams to align school assurance plans with the divisional strategic plan. The division utilized teacher focus groups and a collaborative approach to identify common beliefs, practices, and divisional expectations developing a shared vision and understanding of the division's strategic plan anchored in a culture of learning. The division co-developed an inquiry question with school leaders to guide their work: *How Might We Empower Educators with the Instructional Strategies and the Shared Understanding Necessary to Center Reading Comprehension as a Foundational Component in Every Subject Area?* This guiding question is utilized in our daily work with school leaders and in support of classroom teachers.

The initiative anchored professional development sessions with four teacher focus groups across Divisions I to IV in Fountas and Pinnell's Systems of Strategic Actions connected to the science of reading to develop professional learning teams. This framework illustrates the complex problem-solving the brain must do to construct meaning, giving all educators a shared pedagogical language categorized into three actionable areas:

- **Thinking within the text:** Focusing on word recognition, fluency, and the literal meaning of a text.
- **Thinking beyond the text:** Connecting prior background knowledge to infer, predict, and uncover deeper subtext.
- **Thinking about the text:** Analyzing the author's choices, text structure, and evaluating how effectively the piece was constructed.

The division utilized teacher focus groups and a collaborative approach to identify common beliefs, practices, and divisional expectations developing a shared vision and understanding of the division's strategic plan anchored in a culture of learning.

Elementary foundations: Data-driven support and metacognitive routines

For early and intermediate learners (Divisions I and II), the focus is on preventing early frustration through targeted, systemic interventions and explicit strategy instruction.

Recently, six elementary cohort schools restructured their schedules to create targeted literacy and numeracy blocks. Utilizing screener data, students were tiered into three groups: green (not at risk), yellow (proficient with some gaps), and red (requiring additional support). Staff deployed integrated literacy approaches using FlyLeaf Publishing resources, paired with small-group numeracy instruction leveraging manipulatives and ExploreLearning Math Reflex.

Despite external delays compressing the timeline to the second half of the school year, student literacy and numeracy skill development soared between 30 and 70 per cent, depending upon their intervention level. The success of this pilot is being shared throughout the system and teams are looking at their next learning moves to support critical thinking and literacy and numeracy development.

Within these blocks, elementary teachers successfully utilized highly targeted routines to build positive reader identities:

- **Explain an image:** This strategy leverages the "5Ws" to help students carefully analyze details and distinguish between direct observations and plausible inferences.
- **It says/I say/and so:** This protocol makes the inferential process explicit, providing a structured method for students to ensure their interpretations are grounded in actual text.
- **Placemat strategy:** Used to promote consensus development, this routine requires students to learn from one another and collaboratively synthesize ideas.
- **Think-alouds:** Educators model metacognitive practices by explicitly articulating their own connections and predictions, providing students with a vocabulary for their own thinking.

Secondary complexities: Navigating disciplinary density

In junior and senior high schools (Divisions III and IV), the cognitive demands shift drastically as students navigate highly dense, discipline-specific information. At this stage, comprehension barriers are rarely related to basic decoding. Instead, the initiative empowered secondary focus group teachers to tackle complex roadblocks:

- **Combatting cognitive overload:** Secondary texts are heavily saturated with Tier 2 (academic) and Tier 3 (technical) vocabulary. Without explicit morphological awareness; understanding roots, prefixes, and suffixes, students suffer cognitive overload. To build this capacity, educators deployed *Word Matrices* and *Vocabulary Association Triangles* to help students understand how words and ideas relate.
- **Active self-regulation:** Students lacking executive function often fall into "autopilot reading," passing their eyes over text while retaining nothing. Teachers were trained to embed *Pairing Reading and Writing* routines, utilizing "writing to learn" practices to help students clarify ideas and consciously monitor their own understanding.
- **Providing true scaffolding:** When texts get tough, the instinct is to simplify them. However, educators learned the massive difference between scaffolding a text and bypassing it. True scaffolding ensures the student is still doing the cognitive heavy lifting, rather than lowering the bar.

For district leadership, the implications are clear: investing in cross-curricular literacy is not a supplementary initiative; it is a fundamental catalyst for district-wide achievement. It also requires school and district leaders to align their work with classroom teachers with a common goal of continuous growth, learning and developing our division's shared expectations and beliefs. When we empower educators across all divisions with targeted professional development, explicit frameworks, and an understanding of the cognitive demands unique to their students' age and discipline, we do more than improve reading scores.

We build resilient, self-regulated learners equipped to navigate the complex information landscape of the modern world. Continuous improvement requires a coherent approach from individual classrooms to schools and across schools. The journey never ends but the collaborative processes anchored in the work help system teams navigate continual growth. ■

Michael Borgfjord is the Superintendent of Schools for the Black Gold School Division. With over thirty years of experience in public education spanning two provinces, he has served in a variety of leadership roles, including classroom teacher, instructional coach, school principal, and superintendent.

Nicole Lakusta is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction K-6 for Black Gold School Division. She has worked at the Ministry, Parkland School Division, Holy Spirit Catholic School Division and with various provincial and national educational organizations. Nicole believes in driving systemic change by taking complex data into evidence-based strategies that empower administrators and teachers.

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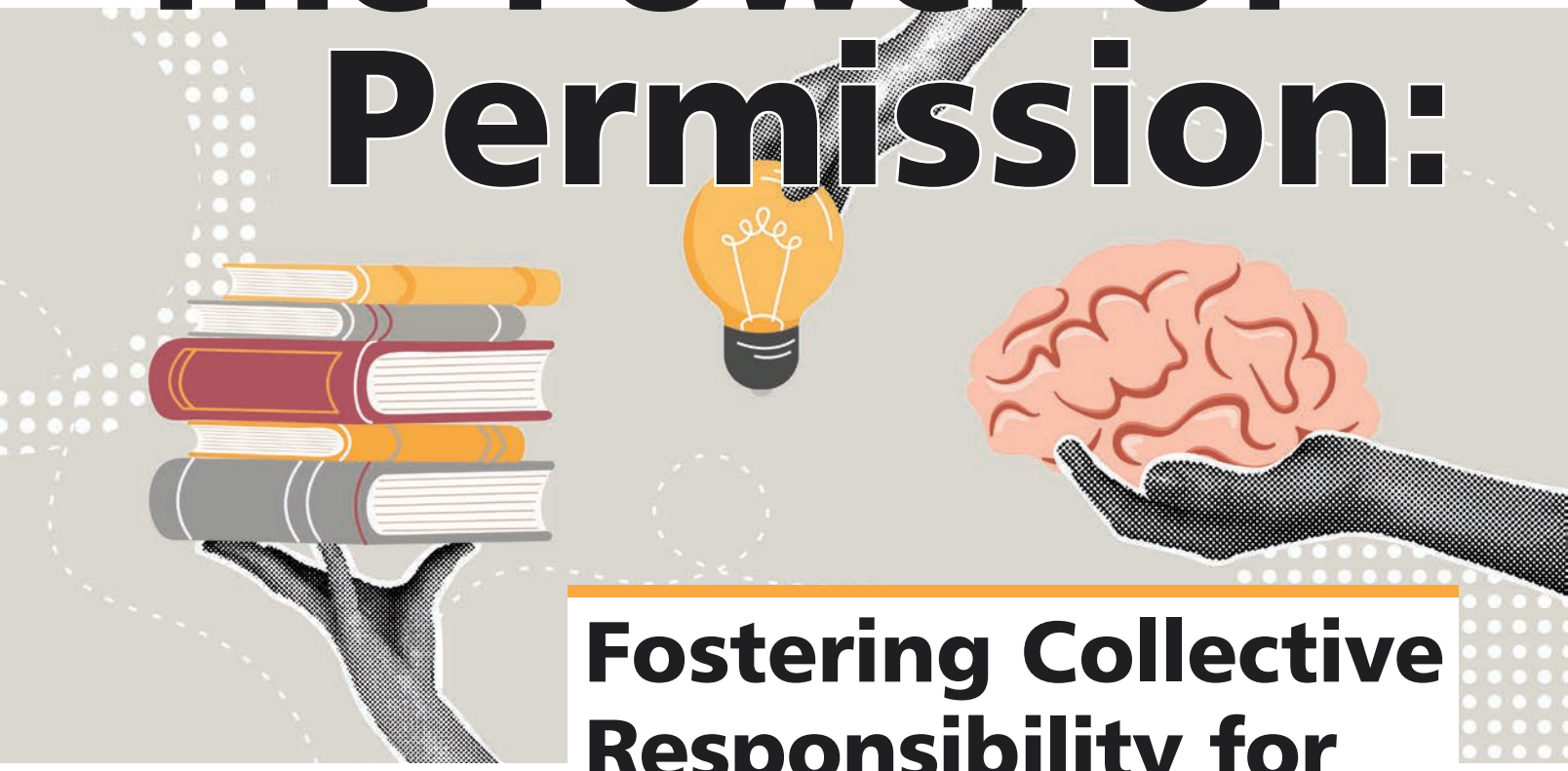
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The Power of Permission:



Fostering Collective Responsibility for New Curriculum Implementation and Learning

By Terri-Lynn Duncan, Horizon School Division

When new provincial curriculum changes were announced with opportunities for optional piloting, Horizon School Division – a rural division serving 3,500 students across 19 Colony schools and 20 diverse community schools – faced a common system challenge. We did not want to force teachers into piloting a curriculum that was optional, but we did want to know if there were teachers willing to pilot and provide feedback from a rural school division perspective.

Early on, experienced educators candidly shared a feeling of vulnerability: *"We feel like brand new teachers again."* Limited initial resources, new outcomes, and a shifting provincial architecture created anxiety. Rather than responding with top-down mandates, our leadership team recognized that our primary challenge was one of building collective capacity without compromising our culture, not merely technical implementation. We needed to build an environment where educators could explore, innovate, and lead from a place of professional confidence.

The strategy of trust: "Permission to learn"

Our first strategic move was counter-intuitive: we chose optional piloting over mandatory division-wide implementation. Anchored in Horizon's vision of *"Engaging and Empowering All Learners,"* senior leadership issued a clear, explicit message: Permission to learn. We explicitly told staff that it was okay not to be instant experts and normalized uncertainty while resources were still developing.

By inviting early adopters and innovators to step forward first, we established trust and professional autonomy. Removing compliance pressure turned time into a support condition rather than a source of stress.

Scaffolding adult learning: The 101/201/301 model and Curriculum Cafés

To back this culture of trust with intentional structure, we scaffolded professional development for adult learners much like we do for students:

- **Curriculum 101 (Architecture & Design):** Focused on understanding the overarching shifts and structural design of the renewed curriculum.
- **Curriculum 201 (KUSPs & Outcomes):** Deepened understanding of Knowledge,

Understanding, Skills, and Procedures (KUSPs) alongside Guiding Questions.

- **Curriculum 301 (Mapping, Assessment & Units):** Engaged educators in collaborative unit design, assessment planning, and reporting coherence once foundational concepts were secure.

The practical engine driving this model were our Friday Curriculum Cafés. Moving away from traditional "sit-and-get" professional development, these voluntary working sessions provided dedicated time for teachers and administrators to co-create resources, address classroom challenges, and refine instructional practices. When teams encountered friction, we honored the principle that *depth precedes speed* – slowing down and revisiting 201 conceptual understanding before pushing into 301 assessment design.

Fidelity as engagement: Transforming isolation into collective leadership

As implementation unfolded, our system definition of fidelity evolved. We measured success not through compliance checklists or rigid pacing schedules, but through indicators of active engagement: voluntary attendance at Curriculum Cafés, collaborative sharing of teacher-designed units, and shifts in professional dialogue from "What is this document?" to "How is this working for our students?"

A significant catalyst occurred when teacher feedback provided to Alberta Education directly resulted in adjustments to the provincial curriculum. Seeing their rural voice make a tangible impact solidified professional agency across our division. Teachers transitioned from isolated practitioners into active leaders who mentored peers, shared instructional successes, and openly problem-solved classroom setbacks. Furthermore, parallel professional learning sessions for school administrators strengthened instructional leadership across our system.

Key system lessons for school leaders

For fellow superintendents and system leaders navigating systemic curriculum change, our journey highlights three core truths:

- **Depth precedes speed:** Respecting the learning curve pays long-term dividends. Attempting to accelerate unit creation before mastering foundational outcome architecture leads to frustration.
- **Permission unlocks agency:** Granting staff explicit permission to learn, fail, and adapt removes the threat of vulnerability and fosters authentic inquiry.
- **Relationships precede systems:** While scaffolded structures provide necessary scaffolding, psychological safety and trust are the ultimate drivers of sustainable instructional coherence.

By prioritizing people over timelines and co-creation over compliance, school divisions can transform curriculum implementation into an enduring culture of collective responsibility. ■

Terri-Lynn Duncan is the Deputy Superintendent of Horizon School Division and has proudly served in leadership within Horizon for the past 13 years. She has a deep love for education and is passionate about creating welcoming, inclusive learning environments where students and staff feel connected, engaged, and supported to grow. Terri-Lynn values relationships, collaboration, and lifelong learning and believes that strong school communities are built when people feel a genuine sense of belonging. Outside of her work in education, she is a wife and proud mother of three daughters and a grandmother, who continues to be an important source of inspiration in her life.





Expanding System Capacity:

Supporting Student Learning by Strengthening Teaching and Leading

By Natasha MacArthur-Poole, Danielle Maczko, and Dr. Mat Campbell, Fort McMurray Catholic Schools

Fort McMurray Catholic Schools is executing a multi-year strategy to elevate student engagement and achievement through a responsive professional learning (PL) framework. Recognizing that unlocking student potential requires expanding teacher and leader capacity, the division has prioritized conditions that foster cross-system collaboration. Conceptualizing this capacity-building as a supportive tapestry, we crafted four interwoven threads:

1. Division-led collaborative learning cohorts,
2. Teacher-led professional learning communities,
3. School-based learning events, and
4. A rich leadership formation strategy.

These threads are anchored by our modified school calendar, which provides 16 annual PL days.

Division-led collaborative learning cohorts

Collaborative learning cohorts (CLCs) were designed as an initiative that allows us to advance division-wide goals outlined in our three-year Education Plan. Informed by Fullan's work on system coherence, these cohorts provide learning and implementation time for teachers on big-ticket changes that demand consistent adoption across the system. Facilitated by internal leaders or Alberta Professional Learning Consortium (APLC) field experts, each CLC spans four sessions during the first half of the school year. This sustained focus avoids one-off workshops and directly informs teachers' PL plans in the second half of the year. Each year of our three-year Education Plan cycle, elementary teachers select from the same menu of five goal-aligned cohorts, ensuring comprehensive growth across key division priorities over the course of the cycle, while secondary teachers join subject-specific cohorts tailored to their specialized assignments.

Teacher-led professional learning communities

Ensuring teachers have the opportunity to pursue PL goals based on self-identified needs is the second thread in our tapestry. While professional learning communities (PLCs) have a long history in our division, fluctuating expectations and structures from year to year hindered their frontline impact. Recognizing the need for sustained momentum, we launched a renewed PLC strategy anchored by clear, system-wide conditions



Principals and vice principals gather for a Leadership Formation session. Photos courtesy of Fort McMurray Catholic Schools.

Anchored by data-driven decision-making, we continually gather evidence from teacher and student surveys, focus groups, and academic results to sharpen our responsiveness without compromising the core beliefs that drive our PL framework.

while preserving teacher autonomy in the collaborative work they undertake. These conditions include providing an overarching structure that promotes data-driven inquiry and immediate classroom piloting of PLC work; training PLC leaders to guide colleagues in the use of the required structure and act as liaisons with the division team; and creating division resources to support PLC work and foster alignment across groups.

Based on feedback, we recently restructured the PL schedule to provide CLC sessions in the first half of the school year and PLC meetings in the second half. The reason for this shift was twofold: First, teachers are able to find like-minded colleagues and inspiration for PLC topics while in their CLCs. Second, concentrating on PLC meetings in the second half of the year allows for less time between sessions, promoting stronger cohesion and steady progress across the cycle. Teachers form their own teams of five to seven members, many of which span multiple schools, and retain full autonomy over their topic, provided their approach aligns with the required structure.



Superintendent Natasha MacArthur-Poole addresses teachers gathered for a professional learning session.

School-based learning events

The third thread of our tapestry is school-based learning (SBL), which reserves dedicated time within our professional learning framework for principals to address their unique local contexts. Guided by School Education Plans that flow directly from our Division Education Plan, principals are allocated PLF time to undertake targeted work across five core categories:

1. School Education Plan goals,
2. Subject or grade-level team planning,
3. Staff meetings,
4. Team-building initiatives, and
5. Independent classroom preparation.

To maintain system-wide alignment, principals submit their term SBL plans to the division leadership team for review and feedback, while our curriculum, instruction, and assessment team

provides ongoing consultation and facilitation support.

Leadership Formation

Just as expanded teacher capacity unlocks student potential, successful school administrators require that same sense of efficacy to serve as the chief instructional leaders in our system. Recognizing this, we recently replaced our historic administration meeting approach, which was largely oriented around information downloads, with a renewed Leadership Formation (LF) strategy focused on professional learning and collaborative workshopping. Our team of school leaders gathers monthly for a half- or full-day session, beginning with targeted professional learning that expands instructional leadership capacity. The middle of each meeting reserves dedicated time for emergent topics or timely system updates, ensuring operational clarity without overwhelming the agenda. To close, school leaders ask questions about division department reports that are distributed a week prior, a structural shift that replaces traditional sit-and-get reporting with active consultation and responsive dialogue.

Ongoing weaving

While the structure of our tapestry remains foundational, its annual weaving requires ongoing re-threading through a comprehensive stakeholder engagement strategy. Anchored by data-driven decision-making, we continually gather evidence from teacher and student surveys, focus groups, and academic results to sharpen our responsiveness without compromising the core beliefs that drive our PL framework. Ultimately, it is this balance of structural consistency and responsive evolution that will ensure our tapestry remains a living, enduring fabric for student success for years to come. ■

Natasha MacArthur-Poole is the Superintendent of Fort McMurray Catholic Schools.

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Deepening the Current:



How Intentional Support Transforms Provincially Mandated Curriculum

By Corina Fennell, Jo-Anne Lanctot, and Ashley Floyd, Living Waters Catholic Separate Schools

The rollout of new elementary curricula brought forward strategic challenges for system leaders across Alberta: how to support teachers through a rapid, mandated shift while maintaining trust and a commitment to high-quality teaching and optimal learning experiences. The Living Waters Catholic Separate Schools is a division that understands relationships and an authentic environment of belonging are critical to the success of staff and students. The initial phase of implementation focused on creating a sense of immediate stability. Facing a scarcity of ready-made quality resources for primary subjects such as English Language Arts and Literature (ELAL), Mathematics, and Physical Education and Wellness resulted in the creation of division-wide curriculum teams composed of teachers with variation in assignments and years of experience. Through collaboration and generative dialogue, these teams mapped outcomes, designed pacing guides and built activity banks, and introduced an overarching concept approach to curriculum implementation.

While this beginning phase created the desired stability, it revealed structural friction. Classroom teachers were pulled from their schools for frequent meetings which disrupted the instruction and was difficult to organize due to the significant shortage of substitute teachers in our rural context. Furthermore, the collaborative work completed in team meetings was not systematically transferring back to local school sites. Teachers provided valuable feedback to the team as such, after a review of what was and was not accomplished, and what was heard, a pivot to phase two was implemented the following year.

Understanding that we must set the structural conditions for teachers to successfully access and participate in the implementation of new curricula, a shift in the model occurred in year three. Meaningful implementation required moving beyond surface-level outcome coverage toward deep, transferable learning and that work must happen directly in the classroom. We restructured the implementation model, moving from broad subject committees to a mobile central team consisting of a curriculum lead teacher, a school leader, and a classroom teacher. Partnering with academic consultants from the Consortium and Concordia University, our mobile team visited each school to engage teachers directly in the prioritization process of the curriculum outcomes. Rather than rushing through outcomes, teachers were given time to deeply understand the language and intention of the curriculum, the required prior knowledge, establishing clear success criteria and defining big ideas.

The site-based model of embedding professional learning allowed the team to work elbow-to-elbow with educators through modeling, co-planning, and reframing assessment practices. It highlighted an essential leadership insight; school leaders must be active co-learners in curriculum work. School leaders are the primary drivers responsible for setting the conditions of purposeful pedagogical shifts when the central team leaves the building. Phase three of the implementation process focused on data-driven decision-making and student voice. Division assessment data and student surveys identified mathematics as a primary area requiring targeted support. In response, Living Waters adopted a common K-6 math resource, engaged with a mathematics consultant, and established a divisional Mathematics Framework to deepen teacher confidence and competence in conceptual instruction. This need for a Mathematics Framework, also inspired a re-write of the existing divisional Literacy Framework that was rolled out in 2014.

Introducing new instructional approaches naturally creates pedagogical tension, particularly when teachers are encouraged to shift practice and try something outside of their comfort zone. Rather than avoiding resistance, the curriculum team works directly with teachers and school leaders to acknowledge discomfort, validate professional expertise and foster professional dialogue around the nuances of numeracy and mathematics. Trust is sustained when leaders remain firm in the goal of deep learning while offering flexibility and coaching support on the journey.

Here in Living Waters Catholic Separate Schools, curriculum implementation is not a compliance exercise or a static event. Rather, it is an evolving process of continuous improvement. By anchoring system structures in intentional support, classroom-level coaching, and responsive leadership, our team is transforming mandated changes into deep meaningful learning for students and staff across the division. ■

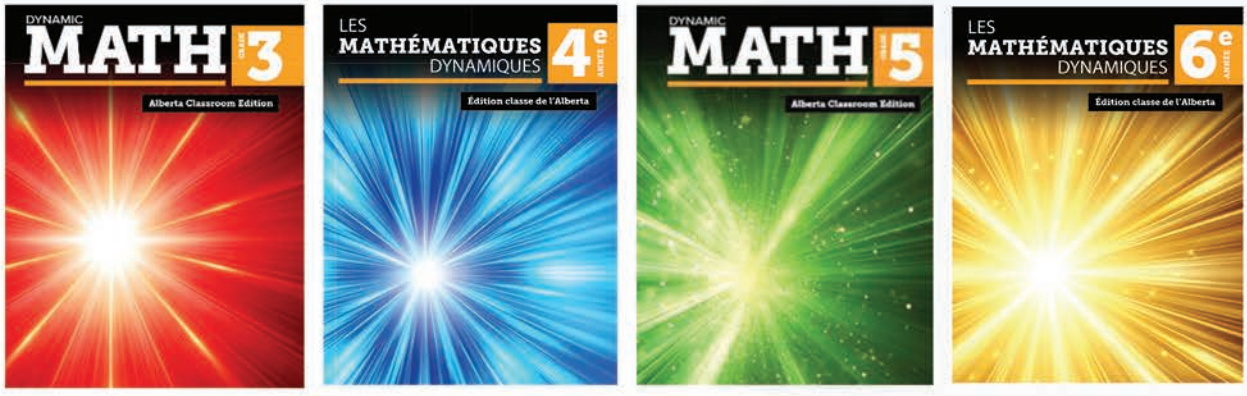
Through collaboration and generative dialogue, these teams mapped outcomes, designed pacing guides and built activity banks, and introduced an overarching concept approach to curriculum implementation.

Corina Fennell is the Curriculum Lead Teacher for Living Waters Catholic Separate School Division. Corina comes from a family of educators and has always known that teaching would be her passion. She spent most of her teaching career in the elementary grades before accepting the curriculum lead for the implementation of the new curriculum.

Jo-Anne Lanctot serves as the Superintendent of Schools for Living Waters Catholic Separate School Division. As Superintendent, her leadership focuses on empowering all staff to provide quality learning and teaching in faith-filled optimal learning environments work by aligning division initiatives with student growth.

Ashley Floyd serves Living Waters Catholic Separate Schools as the Director of Teaching and Learning. Her leadership focuses on supporting school leaders and teams through transitions and changes while maintaining a strong sense of community and belonging.





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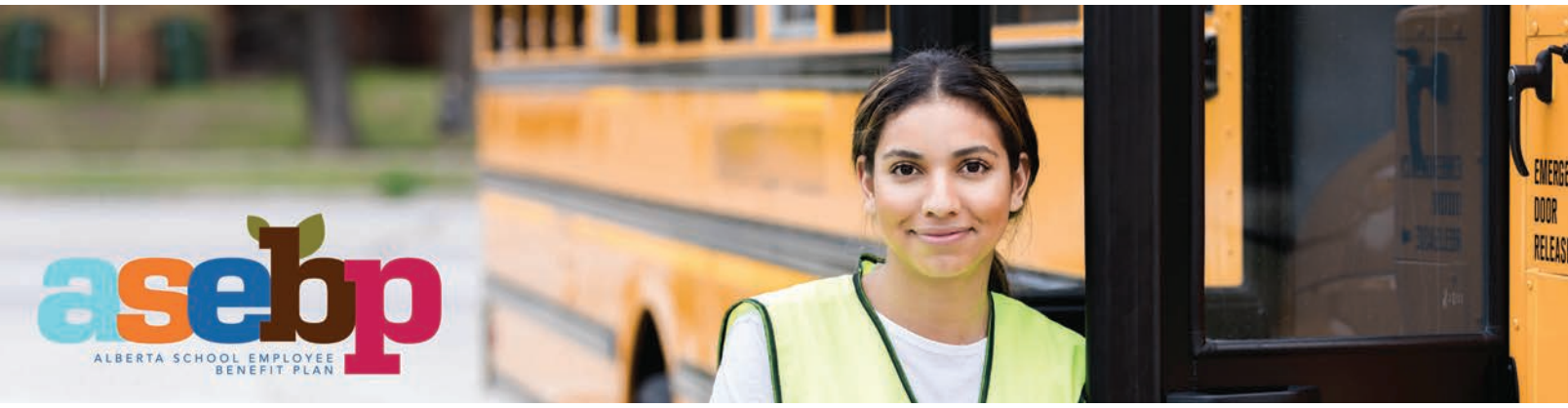
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Strengthening Student Learning Through Employee Health and Well-Being



The Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP) is an employee life and health trust governed by 10 Trustees. It offers a wide variety of health benefits and promotes programs that sustain healthy lifestyles and workplaces for more than 64,000 covered members and their dependants.



By Jocelyn Plakas-Lock, Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan

Alberta is fortunate to have many talented and dedicated education workers, who are committed to achieving instructional excellence and making a meaningful difference in the lives of their students. The Alberta School Employee Benefit Plan (ASEBP) is proud to support this work by promoting, protecting, improving, and sustaining the health and well-being of education workers and their families through comprehensive health benefits and services.

While health and wellness are just one part of the picture when it comes to supporting instructional excellence, they are an essential piece. ASEBP believes that when people have access to benefits and services to maintain their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, they are better equipped to do their best work and focus on student needs. From regular dental cleanings to managing a chronic illness, ASEBP is committed to improving the lives of Alberta's education workers and continually exploring wellness opportunities that extend beyond traditional benefits coverage.

Workplace wellness initiatives

ASEBP's Workplace Wellness Consultants work directly with school leaders and wellness champions to understand their specific needs, challenges, and priorities, and build tailored workplace wellness strategies. They connect leaders to practical tools and resources on topics such as connection, resilience, and mindfulness, that can be easily integrated into employee wellness initiatives. Throughout the year, consultants host sharing sessions with wellness professionals and organizations providing valuable industry advice, existing wellness programs and resources, and successful approaches to supporting employee well-being.

Workplace Wellness Consultants also support wellness by sharing relevant ASEBP health data and insights. As ASEBP provides benefits to 96 per cent of Alberta's school boards, consultants can identify trends and factors that contribute to absenteeism and long-term disability.

By promoting and supporting the health and well-being of Alberta's education workers, ASEBP helps create the conditions for instructional excellence to thrive.

Providing this information helps schools make informed decisions about where to focus their wellness efforts.

Through wellness strategies and the promotion of healthy workplace culture, consultants help foster environments where staff feel valued, connected, and supported. This focus can contribute to higher engagement, collaboration, and innovation among educators, helping create learning environments where students are positioned to succeed.

Wellness Spending Accounts

ASEBP administers Wellness Spending Accounts (WSAs) at the request of employers as a complement to their group benefits. Providing a flexible spending account recognizes that wellness looks different for everyone and provides education workers with greater choice in how they support their own health and well-being. Eligible expenses include products, services, and activities that foster wellness and personal growth, or leisure and entertainment activities that help education workers feel better, stay healthy, or improve overall well-being.

For non-teacher education workers, WSAs also include professional development and learning. This enables employees to build knowledge, strengthen skills, and remain current in their fields, enhancing the support they provide to students, teachers, and administration. As education workers continue to learn and develop, they are better equipped to achieve instructional excellence and contribute to student success.

Employee Family Assistance Program (EFAP)

Another way ASEBP looks to support education workers and their dependants, is through its Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP). This confidential program provides free yearly hours with health practitioners such as registered dieticians, psychologists, registered nurses, and sleep consultants, as well as fitness instructors, career and life coaches, financial advisors, and lawyers, among others. By helping education workers navigate the personal, financial, mental health, and wellness challenges that can impact workplace performance, they are better able to focus on their work and deliver positive learning experiences for students.

Education Worker Recognition Week

When employees feel valued, they are more likely to remain engaged in their work, contributing to healthy environments that help students thrive. Every year, ASEBP hosts an annual Education Worker Recognition Week to highlight its appreciation for the care and excellence that education workers bring to their jobs each day. From November 23 to 27, ASEBP collects stories, spotlights, and messages of gratitude to share on social media, celebrating their contributions. Everyone is invited to take part in Education Worker Recognition Week to say thank you for the role education workers play in Alberta communities.

By promoting and supporting the health and well-being of Alberta's education workers, ASEBP helps create the conditions for instructional excellence to thrive. Whether supporting someone in maintaining their wellness or navigating a health challenge, ASEBP's programs and services help education workers bring the best version of themselves to work each day, strengthening student learning across Alberta. ■

Jocelyn Plakas-Lock is the 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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