

MASS **Journal**

Fall 2024

The official magazine of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents



Public Education: *Leading in a Good Way*



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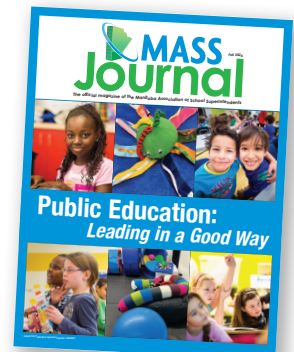
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On the cover: As school leaders, you have a duty to create educational environments where all children flourish and feel safe. Read the articles on page 16 and 20 to see how the folks in the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine and in the Southwest Horizon School Division are creating effective leadership for all students.





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On behalf of the Province of Manitoba, I am pleased to bring greetings to the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS).

Effective leadership not only drives academic success but also can create culturally safe, equitable, and anti-racist environments within our systems. It is vital to recognize and embed Indigenous knowledges and perspectives into our schools, as it is a fundamental aspect of creating an inclusive education system. It requires an unwavering commitment to understanding and integrating Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Equity in education goes beyond providing equal resources; it involves creating an environment where all students have access to opportunities that reflect their cultural identities and histories. Thus, dismantling the systemic barriers that have historically marginalized Indigenous students, staff and community.

Embedding Indigenous perspectives requires us to create spaces where Indigenous students feel valued and heard. This means ensuring Indigenous educators have a prominent role in developing and delivering curriculum that reflects true histories, Indigenous languages and cultures, and lived experience. Simultaneously, it's equally about creating a school culture that truly honors and celebrates Indigenous Knowledges. In practice, this leadership approach translates to action. It involves creating and sustaining partnership with Indigenous communities, supporting culturally appropriate pedagogy, and continually assessing our progress to ensure that we are meeting the needs of all students.

As educational leaders, our commitment to this work reflects our broader values of integrity, empathy, and justice. Indigenous education is more than fulfilling a mandate; it's about fostering a genuine, respectful, and inclusive educational environment.

Let us remember that our impact extends far beyond policy and programs. It shapes the lives and futures of students. Let us lead with purpose, courage, and a steadfast commitment to making a positive difference in the lives of children, youth, and community.

Thank you for your dedication and leadership in this space.

Nello Altomare
Minister of Education and Early Childhood Learning

Au nom de la province du Manitoba, j'ai le plaisir de saluer la Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS). La capacité d'un leader efficace favorise non seulement la réussite

scolaire, mais peut également créer des environnements culturellement surs, équitables et antiracistes au sein de nos systèmes. Il est impératif de reconnaître et d'intégrer les connaissances et les points de vue autochtones dans nos écoles, car il s'agit d'un aspect fondamental de la création d'un système éducatif inclusif. Pour ce faire, il faut manifester un engagement inébranlable à comprendre et à intégrer les façons autochtones de savoir, d'être et de faire.

L'équité dans le secteur de l'éducation ne se limite pas à l'égalité des ressources ; elle s'entend de l'instauration d'un environnement où tous les élèves ont accès à des possibilités qui tiennent compte de leur identité culturelle et de leur histoire. Ainsi, démanteler les barrières systémiques qui ont historiquement marginalisé les étudiants, le personnel et la communauté autochtones.

L'intégration des perspectives autochtones passera par la création d'espaces où les élèves autochtones se sentent valorisés et entendus. Les enseignants autochtones doivent par conséquent jouer un rôle de premier plan dans l'élaboration et la prestation de programmes d'études qui incorporent les histoires, les langues et les cultures autochtones ainsi que les expériences vécues. De même, il faut favoriser une culture scolaire qui honore et célèbre vraiment les connaissances autochtones. En pratique, cette approche de leadership se traduit par l'action, notamment par l'établissement et le maintien de partenariats avec des collectivités autochtones, le soutien d'une pédagogie adaptée à la culture et l'évaluation continue de nos progrès pour nous assurer de répondre aux besoins de tous les élèves.

En tant que leaders en éducation, notre engagement envers ce travail témoigne de nos valeurs plus générales d'intégrité, d'empathie et de justice. L'éducation autochtone ne se limite pas à remplir un mandat ; il s'agit de favoriser un environnement éducatif authentique respectueux et inclusif.

N'oublions pas que notre impact s'étend bien au-delà des politiques et des programmes. Il façonne la vie et l'avenir des élèves. Ensemble, dirigeons avec détermination et courage en faisant preuve d'un engagement inébranlable à changer favorablement le cours des choses pour les enfants, les jeunes et les collectivités.

Merci de votre dévouement et de votre leadership à cet égard.

Nello Altomare
Ministre de l'Éducation et de l'Apprentissage de la petite enfance



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On behalf of the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), I am honored to welcome you to our fall journal. As we embark on a new school year, we are reminded of the immense privilege and responsibility of educating our youth, guiding the next generation, and shaping the future of our society. The theme of this journal, “Leading in A Good Way,” underscores the importance of leading with integrity, compassion, and a commitment to the well-being of our students, staff, and communities. Our leadership should reflect our highest values, fostering a culture of respect, understanding, and inclusivity.

Education is fundamental to a just and thriving society. It is through our schools that we nurture the minds and spirits of future generations, instilling values of critical thinking, civic responsibility, and a love for learning. Education shapes not only the future careers of our students but also their worldviews and capabilities as future leaders. In this endeavor, equity and inclusion are paramount. Every child, regardless of background, deserves access to high-quality education that allows them to reach their fullest potential. Our commitment to equity ensures that barriers to learning are removed, and every student thrives in an environment where they feel valued and supported.

Creating a positive sense of belonging is essential. When students and staff feel connected to their educational community, they are more likely to engage meaningfully and contribute positively. We must continue to cultivate environments where everyone feels seen, heard, and respected. By collaborating across divisions, with our partners, and our communities, we can share best practices and foster innovative solutions that strengthen our education system. Our collective efforts are crucial for meaningful change.

Thank you to all who have contributed to the journal as well as to the mission of MASS and public education. Together, we strive for a world where every student has the opportunity to succeed, and education remains a beacon of hope and progress.

Respectfully,

Jason Young
Co-President

Au nom de la Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), j’ai l’honneur de vous présenter notre revue d’automne. Le début d’une nouvelle année scolaire nous rappelle notre immense privilège, qui est aussi une énorme responsabilité, d’éduquer nos jeunes, de guider la prochaine génération et de façonner l’avenir de notre société. Le thème de cette revue, « Bien diriger », met en lumière l’importance de diriger avec intégrité, compassion et engagement pour assurer le bien-être de nos élèves, de notre personnel et de nos collectivités. Notre leadership devrait être l’incarnation de nos valeurs les plus importantes, favorisant une culture de respect, de compréhension et d’inclusion.

L’éducation est fondamentale pour parvenir à une société juste et prospère. C’est grâce à nos écoles que nous nourrissons le cœur et l’esprit des générations futures, en inculquant des valeurs de pensée critique, de responsabilité civique et d’amour de l’apprentissage. L’éducation façonne non seulement les futures carrières de nos élèves, mais aussi leurs visions du monde et leurs capacités en tant que futurs leaders. Dans ce parcours, l’équité et l’inclusion sont primordiales. Chaque enfant, quel que soit son milieu, mérite d’avoir accès à une éducation de grande qualité qui lui permettra de réaliser son plein potentiel. Notre engagement envers l’équité veille à éliminer les obstacles à l’apprentissage afin que chaque élève puisse s’épanouir dans un environnement où il se sent valorisé et soutenu.

Il est essentiel de créer un sentiment d’appartenance positif. Lorsque les élèves et le personnel se sentent liés à leur communauté éducative, ils sont plus susceptibles de s’engager de manière utile et d’apporter une contribution favorable. Nous devons continuer à cultiver des milieux où tout le monde se sent vu, entendu et respecté. En collaborant avec les autres divisions, nos partenaires et nos collectivités, nous pouvons échanger des pratiques exemplaires et favoriser l’adoption de solutions innovantes qui renforcent notre système d’éducation. Nos efforts collectifs sont cruciaux pour donner lieu à un changement important.

Merci à toutes les personnes qui ont contribué à la revue, à la mission de la MASS et à l’éducation publique. Ensemble, nous nous efforçons de créer un monde où chaque élève a la possibilité de réussir et où l’éducation demeure un phare d’espoir et de progrès.

Respectueusement,

Jason Young
Co-Président

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Superintendent/CEO
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Division scolaire franco-
manitobai



Leanne Peters, Professional Learning
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Hanover School Division

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Executive Director



Karen Wohlgemuth
Executive Assistant

MASS provides leadership for public education by advocating in the best interests of learners and supports its members through professional services.

MASS believes that our mandate is to be *leaders of learning*, in our local school systems and in the broader domains of provincial, national and global public education. MASS believes a quality education empowers the whole child to constructively participate in global society.

We model learning that is:

- active and visible;
- based on robust research;
- tested through purposeful application in the field;
- evaluated using a wide range of meaningful data;
- responsive/supportive

We take responsibility for our own continuous learning and the learning of everyone we lead:


- creating and ensuring safe, supportive, inclusive and challenging environments;
- ensuring essential learning for each and every child;
- preparing others to go beyond our own learning.

We are guided by our learning in shaping policy and practice to achieve what is best.

MASS believes that *improved achievement and well-being for all of our students requires a shared commitment to raising both equity and quality.*

- A conscious and persistent commitment to equity, system-wide and across sectors, leads to poverty reduction, greater inclusion and an appreciation for the riches that diversity brings.
- A purposeful and sustained commitment to quality education for every student increases the capacity for teaching, learning and leading throughout the system.
- A strong grounding in literacy and numeracy and a rich learning experience involving inquiry, curiosity, creativity and artistic expression enables all students to achieve success and to flourish in life, academics and career.
- A respect for and openness to authentic youth voices and support for meaningful student action are critical for building capacity and self-efficacy in our student

MASS actively works towards *equity and quality throughout the public education system, with a special focus on three action areas:*

- 
1. Early Learning
 2. Indigenous Education
 3. Mental Health and Well-Being



The **Early Learning Committee** will take leadership to ensure that MASS:

- Advocates for full implementation of the Calls to Action in the MASS position paper on Early Childhood Education.

The **Indigenous Education Committee** will take leadership to ensure that MASS:

- Builds capacity in MASS and school divisions to address the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action.
- Promotes ever increasing academic achievement, graduation, school completion and positive life outcomes for Indigenous students, informed by collective inquiry into evidence.
- Actively supports the teaching of Indigenous perspectives, corrective history and culture and the use of Indigenous languages.

The **Mental Health and Well-Being Committee** will take leadership to ensure that MASS:

- Advocates for implementation of a comprehensive provincial Children and Youth Mental Health Strategy.
- Collaborates with Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning to develop tools and indicators for assessing the well-being and well-becoming of students in schools.
- Pursues inter-sectoral liaisons with public and mental health organizations and agencies.
- Contributes to a national voice on mental health through Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) and through input into the Canadian Mental Health Strategy.
- Promotes Mental Health Literacy in mental health for all educators and pre-service educators.
- Sharing of Mental Health & Well-being paper with community and provincial partners. ■

Leading in a Good Way: Public Education

By Julie Cordova, Stephanie Zirino, Jo Ann Pinera, Rebecca Chartrand, and Colleen Roberts, Pembina Trails School Division

In the Fall of 2023, a group of senior leaders, school division trustees, principals, consultants, and staff gathered at the Pembina Trails School Division board office. It marked the conclusion of a yearlong collaboration with Rebecca Chartrand and Jo Ann Pinera of Indigenous Strategy Alliance. As school division representatives reflected on the transformative experience of the previous year, we recognized the magnitude of the upcoming task. We were to embark on implementing the newly formulated divisional anti-racism policy, ensuring its active application across the division and our shared spaces,

This painting was inspired by the Quecha legend of "The Courage of the Little Hummingbird." The art piece was gifted to Pembina Trails School Division by Rebecca Chartrand and Jo Ann Pinera.

The artist is Jo Ann Pinera, who used ash from sacred fires that were held over the summer of 2023. She also collected river rocks from the Red and Seine rivers to create the different pigments.



The Little Hummingbird

MICHAEL NICOLL YAHGULANAAS

Here is the story of the great forest that caught on fire. The terrible fire burned & raged. All of the animals were afraid and fled from their homes. The elephant, & the tiger ran. The beaver scurried and the frog leapt away. Above them the birds flew in a panic.

The creatures huddled at the edge of the forest & watched. All except for one. Little hummingbird did not abandon the forest. She flew to the stream and picked up a single drop of water in her beak. She flew back and let the water fall into the ferocious fire. She dashed to the stream and brought another drop, she continued, back and forth, back and forth. The other animals watched, frightened.

"What can I do?" the fire is too hot and I am scared! sobbed Rabbit

"This fire is so big!" howled Wolf "and I am so small!"

"I can't do anything about this fire" croaked Frog. "My wings will burn!" cried Owl.

Little Hummingbird continued her work. She flew quickly, picking up more water and putting it, drop by drop, onto the burning forest.

Finally, Big Bear said, "Little Hummingbird, what are you doing?"

Little Hummingbird looked at the other animals. She said, "I am doing what I can."

"The Little Hummingbird" by Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas. Photos courtesy of Annette Hacault.

including all 36 schools. This task, as noted by Rebecca Chartrand, “[is] not a small feat – it demands courage, a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths, and a dedication to effecting real, lasting change.” This was our opportunity to *Lead in a Good Way*.

As this celebration ended, the Pembina Trails Senior Administration Team received a gratitude gift from Rebecca and Jo Ann: a beautifully crafted original painting of a single hummingbird. Its colours, crafted from river rocks collected along the Red and Seine Rivers and the black pigment created from sacred fire remnants, symbolized resilience. The significance of the hummingbird was from a legend told by the Indigenous Quecha People of South America. The legend states that long ago, the Great Forest was ablaze. As the animals of the forest dashed and darted away from the flames, the hummingbird dove toward the water and then back toward the fire. Over and over, the hummingbird filled her beak with a single droplet of water and released it onto the raging flames. The

As Rebecca Chartrand reflected, this process was about, “creating spaces where Indigenous students, and all students of colour, can thrive without the burden of systemic barriers or the weight of stereotypes and prejudices.”

fire grew and the smoke was thick. The other animals questioned the hummingbird saying, “What do you think you’re doing?” And the hummingbird turned to back to the animals and responded, “I’m doing what I can.”

And so began our journey toward anti-racism in Pembina Trails. Over the next eight months, community members engaged in discussions, collaboration, and learning, exploring the authentic essence

of anti-racism. As Rebecca Chartrand reflected, this process was about, “creating spaces where Indigenous students, and all students of colour, can thrive without the burden of systemic barriers or the weight of stereotypes and prejudices.”

Our first step was to connect with community members through a World Café to gather their perspectives and individual viewpoints and experiences regarding what anti-racism signifies to them.



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INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES FROM...

Parents and students:

"...continuously discussing the history and struggles of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC)."

"...implementing the policy actively in schools."

"...ensuring the policy remains dynamic and integrated into school culture."

"...educating parents and the community, influencing other policies, and recognizing individuals' progress."

Educators:

"...ensuring equitable access involves acknowledging others' experiences, believing them, and actively addressing past injustices through action, not just acknowledgment."

"...addressing racism isn't about blame but recognizing its hindrance to progress, fostering empathy, and choosing a challenging path towards genuine equality."

"...continuously educating ourselves, promoting self-awareness, and actively combating racism are integral. Anti-racism is a lifelong commitment that should influence our practices, policies, and beliefs."

"...actively dismantling racist beliefs embedded in systems through various mediums and actions like discrimination and violence is essential. This requires action at individual, community, and societal levels."

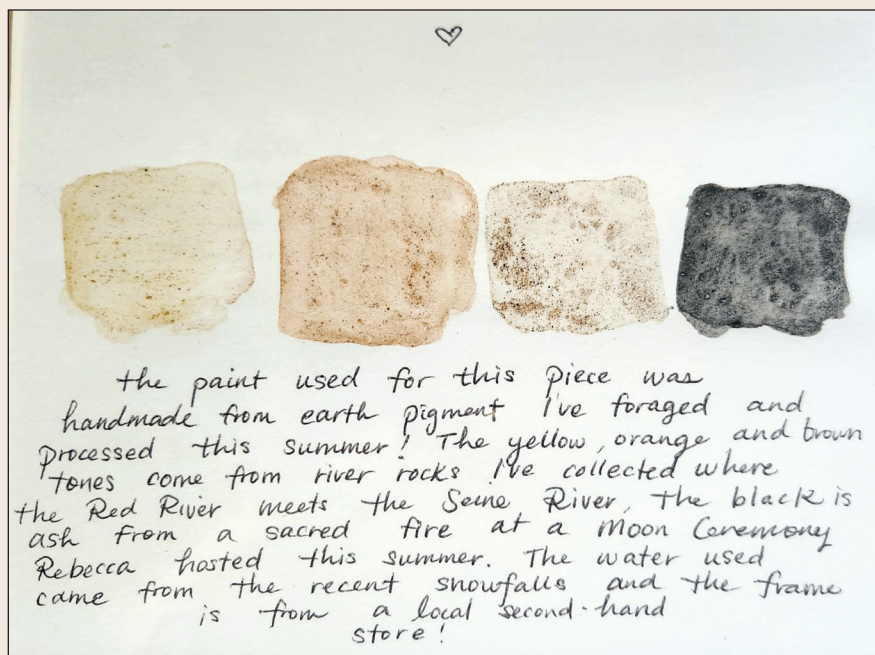
In discussions with students, we were reminded that a core tenet of anti-racism is having a consistent and proactive response when we encounter racism. As a result, we asked community members to identify ways that adults in our buildings could remove barriers to inclusion and promote belonging in our schools. Their comments overwhelmingly emphasized the importance of diversifying instructional materials, elevating student voices, and interrupting and addressing racism when it arises.

WHAT WE HEARD FROM...

Parents and students:

"[Anti-racism means] a more diverse curriculum."

"[Anti-racism means] stopping racist jokes and slurs."



Samples of the paint used for "The Courage of the Little Hummingbird" painting by Jo Ann Pinera.

"[Develop and implement] a mechanism that responds to racist activities attitudes behaviours."

Teachers and school principals:

"Eliminating barriers is integral to anti-racism efforts. Through education, listening to diverse viewpoints, and self-reflection, we can identify and address these barriers."

"Educators must listen to students, educate themselves on racism, and acknowledge colonial influences. This involves updating materials to embrace diverse cultural narratives beyond a singular Canadian identity."

"Staff must confront and reject hate speech, establishing clear boundaries and consistently enforcing them. Engage in discussions with curiosity, challenging racist beliefs, and acknowledging diverse perspectives in curricula."

"Every student should feel welcome, valued, and empowered. Replace 'tolerance' for acceptance, respect, justice, and empowerment in diversity efforts. Recognize and normalize diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds to combat marginalization."

"Give priority to amplifying BIPOC voices and viewpoints. Respond promptly to racism reports – conduct thorough investigations and prioritize justice."

"Ensure that books and resources reflect the diversity of students. Incorporate diverse perspectives into decision-making processes."

School board trustees:

"Ensure that racialized and marginalized students feel valued and included in their school environments. Encourage them to share their experiences openly with teachers and leaders, offering collaborative support and solutions."

"Celebrate students' diverse backgrounds and cultures. Collaborate with them to educate peers on their heritage. Encourage student-led affinity groups for open discussion. Empower BIPOC students in leadership roles and support their aspirations in various professions, including education."

Lastly, we asked community members how the divisional anti-racism policy could be a responsive, meaningful, and living document. Their responses underscored the significance of system wellness and strategic investment.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM...

Parents and students:

"[It is important to have] diverse representation in media and books."

"[We need more] diverse staff in school."

"[It is important to ensure] students see themselves in the staff (representation)."

"[Prioritize] data collection – observations, recommendations, forms that record specific incidences [of racism]"

"Find a mechanism to give authentic, real, appropriate voice [and] representation of individuals impacted and allies."

Teachers and school principals:

"Schools should include anti-racism in planning, support teachers, report on inclusive practices, promote diverse leadership, enforce a zero-tolerance policy for hate speech, and engage parents for cultural insights."

"[The division can] collect race data on staffing and student populations, create opportunities for racialized employees and parents, and collect data on perception and create means to intercept and change attitudes. [Ensure] representation of all cultures at all levels."

"The strength of the document lies in the commitment of those implementing it. To keep it alive, training, collaboration, and education are vital at various levels. Continuous investment in staff training and education is essential for individual growth."

"Policy ideals must be exemplified by divisional leaders, particularly at the Board and Senior Administration levels. Enforce actionable elements of the policy. Diverse representation in leadership and staff is crucial for achieving policy goals."

While this work is not always easy, it is crucial. The co-creation of our anti-racism policy has been an incredible and transformative journey of humility, reflection, and courage. And while there is much work ahead of us, like the hummingbird, we will continue to do what we can. ■

With gratitude, we acknowledge that several people were instrumental in providing guidance, lived experience, and insight into this journey. While this list is

not exhaustive, we extend deepest gratitude for the members of the Pembina Trails Board of Trustees, Senior Administration Team, Anti-Racism Steering Committee, and the many Pembina Trails parents, students, teachers, consultants, and community members for contributing to the policy and sharing their voice in this article. Your courage and commitment are invaluable.

Julie Cordova is dedicated to creating learning conditions that

inspire students to explore, innovate, and achieve their fullest potential.. Stephanie Zirino has taught for nearly 15 years in local and international schools and recently completed her Master of Human Rights degree at the University of Manitoba.

Thanks to Jo Ann Pinera, the artist of "The Courage of the Little Hummingbird," Rebecca Chartrand, and Colleen Roberts for contributing to this article as well.



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Effective Leadership on the Day-to-Day

By Alain Laberge, Division scolaire franco-manitobaine



Photos in this spread are of children from the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine. Photos courtesy of Alain Leberge.



Constructive school leadership has a valuable impact not only on learning but also on students. Here is what Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2020) had to say about school leadership: “School leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization which positively influence the quality of teaching and learning. While moderate in size, this leadership effect is vital to the success of most school improvement efforts.”

So, what is effective leadership, and what does it look like on a Monday morning in a school setting? How can public schools be led effectively? How can you ensure that the superintendent team and the schools are all aligned and heading toward the same goals? Education means learning from all situations encountered throughout one’s journey. Therefore, here are a few elements to take into consideration for leading in a good way:





Communication: A top-down approach will only confuse and rebuff most of your colleagues. It is critical to have a collaborative approach. The divisional senior school leaders have a key role to play in engaging their principals to be a huge part of the solution.

Put students first: Ensure the school day begins by welcoming the students when they get off the bus to their classroom. It may sound insignificant to many, but knowing a significant adult awaits them means a lot to children.

Social cohesion: Establish positive and respectful interpersonal relationships between students, staff, and parents to facilitate open communication and eliminate possible tensions.

Building bridges with school communities: In a minority setting, the school becomes the focal point for all pedagogical and cultural activities. By working together, schools, parents and administration can optimize the day-to-day implementation.

Proper teacher and support staff training: Education must keep up with studies, best practices, and research to stay ahead of the curve. Things are evolving at the speed of light, and schools can't lag and stumble over old principles no longer recognized as good practices.

Public schools are a mirror of our society: They are rich in diversity, which, with good leadership from all, leads to harmony across differences. Public schools are a microcosm of the real world; students are exposed to many different cultural pluralities, and it helps strengthen intercultural collaboration.

Coherence between the code of conduct and its application (and

explication) is paramount: Students will quickly notice if they are treated unfairly. The same can be said for staff; it is human nature to compare ourselves, and everybody wants to be treated ethically.

Engaging educators to steer in the same direction: It begins with understanding the school's educational plan and how it will be implemented, setting goals, and working accordingly.

Engaging students: Students learn differently; therefore, it is important to use various teaching methods. As educators, we need to constantly stay mindful of all the new advances that studies and data are providing us. Studies have shown that active learning (or learning by doing) engages the student to a higher level of knowledge. Keeping students motivated through quality teaching is key

when parents and students must choose a school.

Special education services and integrity: A school is a microcosm of our society. In this regard, diversity, equity, and inclusion must be the pillars at the center of our mission and our actions. Recognizing that all students are different, we must, as a school division, walk the talk and not just talk about how important these dossiers are but be proactive.

Registering their child in a public school is in parents' hands. They will compare and make their choice based on the quality of education/programming offered, and knowing their children are in good hands in a safe school. Schools are not typically as good as they would like to be in communicating how good their school is; and so, this is when a good communication department can be very helpful. This is only possible with synergy and cohesion between senior administration, the parents, and the schools. While often in the shadows, the superintendent team plays a crucial role in navigating the meanders of all administrative policies and how to liaise them into what they look like in a school setting. ■

After working for 15 years in the British Columbia education system, Alain Laberge took the reins of the Division scolaire franco-manitobaine (DSFM) in 2013. His favourite comment: who says English is easy to learn?

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Write for the *MASS Journal*!

The *MASS Journal* reaches readers every spring and fall, sharing stories of best practices, challenges and how they've been overcome, thoughts on leadership, and much more! If you would like to write for the Spring 2025 issue, please send an abstract to Executive Director Barb Isaak (barb.isaak@mass.mb.ca) and copy editor Jenna Collignon (jcollignon@matrixgroupinc.net). Include your name, position, and division, and two to three sentences on your topic.

Here are details for the Spring 2025 issue:

Theme: Public Education: Leading in a Good Way (Part Two)

Abstracts due November 15, 2024

Final articles due March 10, 2025



Notes:

If your abstract is accepted, you will be notified and provided with a word count and further details.

Articles cannot be company or product promotional.

The preference is to have articles written by school and division senior leadership (superintendents, principals, etc.). If you do not fall within this category but have a great idea, please work with your senior leadership on the abstract and, if accepted, the final submission.

Beyond Beanbags: Rethinking Sensory Supports

By Stephanie Emberly and Daydra Dietrich, Southwest Horizon School Division



Many schools are grappling with how to manage student behaviour disruptions, as it can be disruptive to classes. Partnering with occupational therapists (OTs) can significantly reduce these behaviours and redirect valuable resources toward educational leadership. In the school setting, a student's occupational performance may be impaired by a physical, developmental, sensory, attentional, and/or learning challenge. The social, attitudinal and cultural environment, along with the availability of supports (person support or equipment support), impacts on the student's occupational performance in the school setting.¹ By proactively addressing student needs, we can create a more supportive learning environment that fosters student success. OTs can transform sensory spaces into powerful tools for student success.²

By leveraging their expertise in sensory processing and regulation, OTs can create tailored sensory supports that go beyond traditional beanbags and dim lighting. Within Southwest Horizon School Division, through the leadership of Rachel Svistovski, Principal for Souris School, and the dedicated efforts of our OT, Daydra Dietrich piloted a project achieving impressive results in a short time frame. We've documented significant reductions in dysregulated behaviors, leading to improved student well-being and focus.

Data collected from February 2024 to June 2024 shows notable improvements for the students that we monitored in the project. For the purposes of data tracking Svistovski first tracked the amount of time that her team spent responding to incidents in Fall 2023. As school principals and their teams know some students have

daily incidents of dysregulation and some students will go days or weeks “holding it together” to then have a triggering event where it can take a significant amount of time to help a student regulate themselves again. To assist in processing data the response times were averaged out to a daily basis (see Figure 1). The school then tracked the same students once the OT Education Assistant was trained and the improved sensory space was available (from February to June). Two students did show an increase in dysregulation, this is attributed to events outside of school control. The other eight students had reduced incidents of dysregulation.

Through the supports provided, two students were able to have zero further incidents.

Collaborating for success

As the Superintendent, I met with our division’s OT’s, Daydra Dietrich and Laura Dueck, to brainstorm how we could best utilize their skills and availability, particularly in the context of sensory spaces. We realized that designating a single Educational Assistant (EA) might be the most effective way to support a sensory space. This approach was inspired by examples from our readings and research. While we didn’t have the resources for a full-time OT in this role, we saw an opportunity to adapt the model to our context.

The school team hired an EA whose entire role was dedicated to the sensory space. The EA is supervised and programmed via the OT and monitored by the school resource teacher Karen Butterfield, who has been a tremendous support in getting the project off the ground. The OT provided comprehensive training to the EA, covering topics such as relationship building, connection, sensory processing, self-regulation, and sensory-based strategies. Approximately every six weeks, the OT spent a full day observing students with the EA, reviewing documentation, and having thorough discussions to tailor planning for each student’s use of the sensory space.



*By proactively addressing student needs, we can create a more supportive learning environment.
Photos and graph courtesy of Stephanie Emberly.*

		Avg Min/Day Pre	Avg Min/Day Post	Difference
Student A	Guidance, Resource, OT	13.085	9.04	4.04
Student B	Guidance, Resource	10.85	6.91	3.96
Student C	Guidance, Resource, OT	7.23	7.12	0.11
Student D	Resource, OT	7.12	0.64	6.49
Student E	Waiting List	4.25	4.36	0.11
Student F	Guidance, Resource	4.25	3.94	0.32
Student G	Resource, OT	1.8	3.4	1.6
Student H	Resource, OT	1.4	0	1.49
Student I	OT	.85	0	.85

Figure 1: Average daily response times in students.

Key factors for success

Several factors contributed to the success of this initiative:

- 1. Consistency:** The room was always led by an adult, and students were never sent to the space alone.
- 2. Clear boundaries:** We established and maintained clear guidelines for the use of the space.
- 3. Open communication:** Transparent and frequent communication between the EA, Resource Teacher,

Classroom Teacher, Principal, and OT was crucial as we navigated this new territory.

4. **Flexibility:** We remained open to adjusting our approach as we learned what worked best for our students.

This model of utilizing OT expertise is just one way we've found to make the consultative model work in our changing school environment.

The impact on students

The success of this approach is best illustrated through the experiences of our students. One student with autism initially was hesitant about using the space and interacting with the new EA gradually began to utilize the space consistently. We observed lasting positive effects throughout their day, including increased independent use of their low-tech communication device. This progress, achieved through months of patient relationship building, demonstrates the power of tailored sensory supports.

It's important to note that progress wasn't always linear or without challenges. There were instances of boundary testing and occasional misbehaviours. However, these moments were far outweighed by the overall positive impact on student well-being and classroom engagement.

Zones of regulation and the importance of collaboration

Occupational therapists can help educators develop sensory support strategies tailored to each student's individual needs. Through collaboration, educators and OTs can work together to:

- Assess students' sensory processing needs,
- Develop individualized sensory support plans,
- Implement sensory support strategies in the classroom, and
- Monitor the effectiveness of sensory supports and make adjustments as needed.

Students' behaviour is commonly perceived as being within their conscious control, ultimately impacting the attitudes, judgments, and behaviour of those working directly

with this student population.³ In education, the Zones of Regulation approach is a commonly used strategy for addressing dysregulated behaviour (EBD). While this approach has merit, it depends on students being able to pause and assess what is occurring within themselves meta-cognitively and physically. If students lack **interoception skills** (recognizing that their body is giving signs of stress or anger), it is difficult for them to use the zones of regulation effectively. Occupational Therapists can work with educators to help grow the student's interoception skills.

Creating a more effective sensory room

Sensory rooms can be a valuable tool for students with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD). However, it is essential to consider designing the rooms to meet multiple needs capable of both stimulating and calming students.³ Here are some tips for creating a more effective sensory room:

- Provide a variety of sensory supports, including tactile, auditory, visual, olfactory, and proprioceptive input,
- Allow students to choose the sensory supports that they find most helpful,
- Ensure the sensory room is well-organized and uncluttered, and
- Have well-trained staff to use the sensory room effectively.

Conclusion

Sensory support can be a powerful tool for helping students with emotional and behavioural difficulties succeed in school. By collaborating with OTs, educators can create sensory support strategies tailored to each student's individual needs. This will lead to improved student outcomes, including better focus and behaviour, and more time for administrators and school teams to focus on educational leadership instead of responding retroactively to dysregulated behaviour.

Our experience in Southwest Horizon demonstrates the potential of this collaborative approach. By rethinking how we utilize OT expertise and implement sensory supports, we can create more inclusive, supportive learning

environments that benefit all students. We are extending the pilot to include Melita School in 2024-2025 to test the ability to replicate these results. ■

Stephanie Emberly is the Superintendent of Southwest Horizon School Division with 26 years of experience in education. Innovation and thinking "outside the box," creating amazing school experiences, and fostering environments where students can thrive are Stephanie's passions as an educator.

Daydra Dietrich has worked as an occupational therapist for 18 years and has worked within the PROMISE Years program for the entirety. The PROMISE Years program covers four school divisions in southwest Manitoba and consists of physiotherapy, occupational therapy, and pre-school speech language pathology services. Daydra has had the unique opportunity to work in all four of the divisions throughout the program over the years, and covering ages birth to 21, and the environments of: schools, family homes, daycare centres and pre-school programs.

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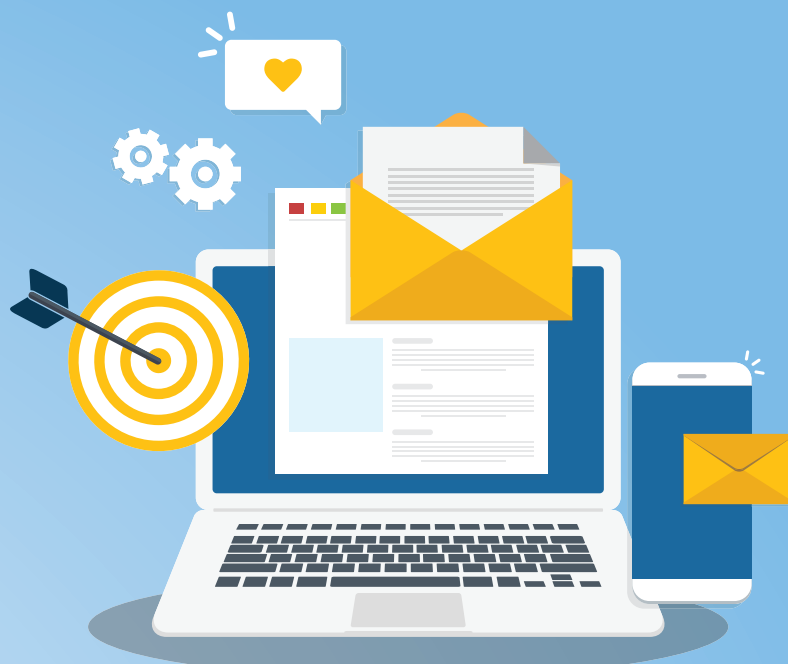
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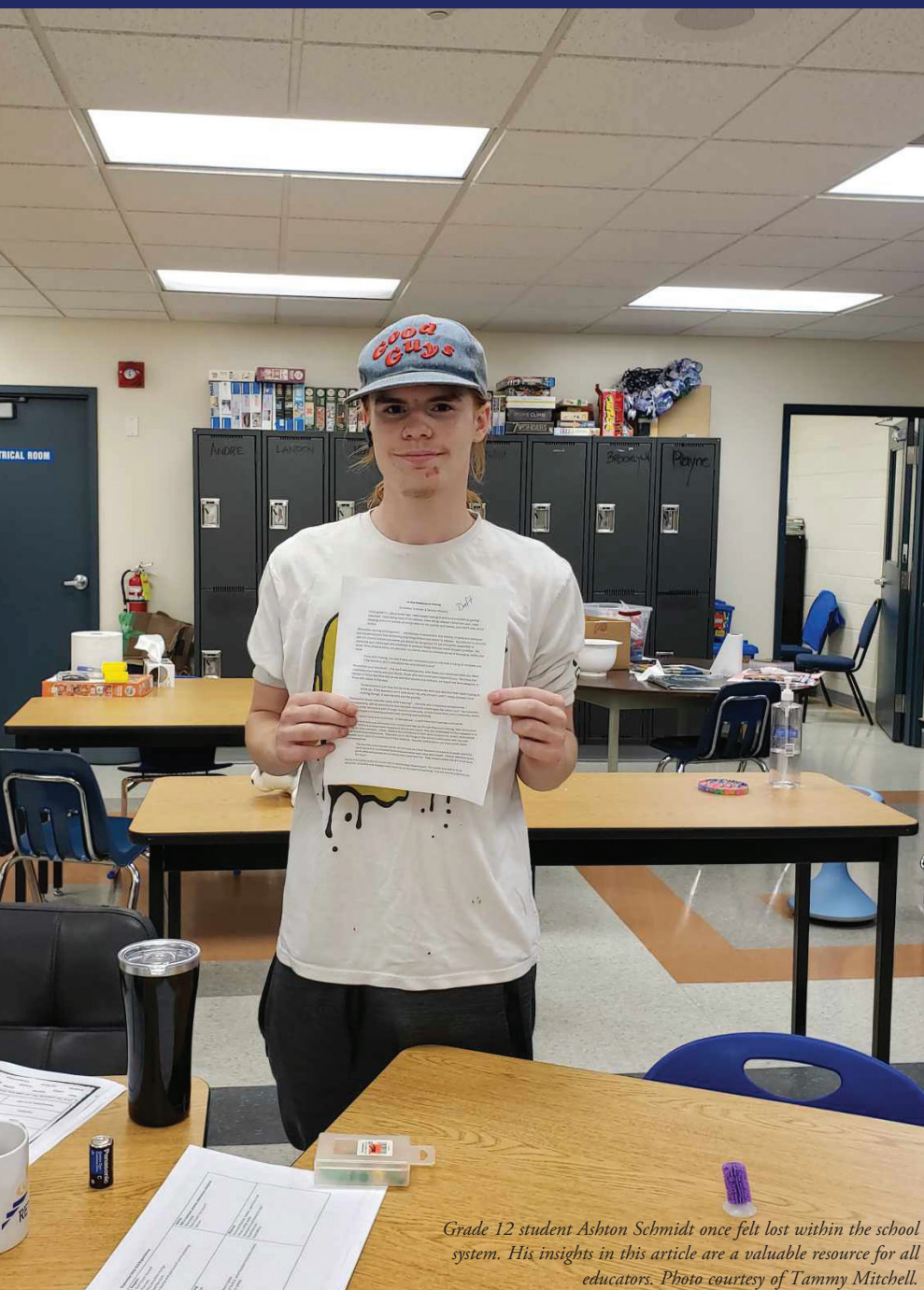
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In the Absence of Caring

By Ashton Schmidt with Tammy Mitchell,
River East Transcona School Division



Grade 12 student Ashton Schmidt once felt lost within the school system. His insights in this article are a valuable resource for all educators. Photo courtesy of Tammy Mitchell.

Public education is meant to be a place of opportunity and growth for every student – a place where they feel recognized, welcomed, and inspired to learn. But for some, the reality of school is far different. They struggle to find their place, feel disconnected from their peers, and often believe that their voices and experiences don't matter. This sense of alienation can lead to disengagement and frustration, leaving them on the margins of the learning experience. For these students, school becomes a place to endure rather than a place to thrive.

Following, you will find excerpts from Ashton's story, in his own words. He is a student who, at one point, felt lost within the system. Ashton's perspective offers powerful insights into what public education can and should be for every learner.

I'm in grade 11...about a year ago, I was caught vaping at school and ended up getting searched. I was failing most of my classes, I was redoing classes I failed last year, I was skipping school to smoke, smoking weed on my spares, and overall, just didn't care about school.

Remember starting kindergarten? The feelings of excitement and anxiety, of pride and pleasure, and the anticipation that something truly magnificent was about to happen. You desired to become part of a school community where you would be recognized for your strengths, supported to overcome your challenges, and stretched to achieve things that you never thought possible. For some, these dreams easily are attained; for others, there is a limited sense of belonging, safety, and value.

If you don't belong, you don't have any motivation and no one else is trying to motivate you. If the teachers don't care about me, why should I care?

Remember your teachers? The staff who noticed you, who knew your name, and what you liked; who knew your friends and your family; those who welcomed and respected you. We knew the names of those teachers and as we switched grades and schools, we hoped we were assigned to those who cared in this way.

Some teachers just have bitchy tones and attitudes, and I just decided that I wasn't going to show up. If the teachers don't care about me, why should I care? I really showed them nothing though, it was me who lost the grades.

Remember those kids who really didn't belong? The kids who completed assignments inconsistently, whose attendance was sporadic and who challenged the status quo? You watched as they either became part of a larger school community, or they found their own community, which might or might not have supported their learning and well-being.

I didn't have a lot of friends. (I) felt left out... it didn't feel like I had any voice at all.

As some kids become alienated from school and feel as though they don't belong, their motivation wanes. Without a supportive network of adults and peers, they are challenged to stay engaged or to strive for improvement. Often, there is inconsistency in their work completion, erratic attendance, and challenging behaviours. They end up on the fringe of the school community with low self-esteem and a lack of confidence in their abilities. Teacher indifference can exacerbate these consequences.

The teacher just blabbed on for 30 minutes and then handed out a piece of paper and told us to hand it in completed tomorrow and then next class and repeat. (Some) teachers don't go to different places for students who need them to. They make it seem like it's more work for them.

Public education plays a crucial role in addressing these issues. For public education to be effective, empathy and engagement must be at the heart of teaching. It is not merely a system for delivering curricula, but also a system to develop a community that actively engages and supports every student. School leaders have an obligation to create structures that promote student engagement and wellbeing where every student feels valued. Teachers have an obligation to build relationships with students, to understand their needs and to provide personalized support when needed.

I don't feel like it's the teacher's job to be buddy-buddy, shoulder-shoulder to kids; obviously they should be there to listen. I had a few teachers who were good.

Manitoba's four-year student-tracked high school graduation rate is

82.6 per cent

as reported on the Manitoba Education Website (June 2023).¹

33 per cent

of children in care graduated from high school as reported by the Manitoba Task Force on Education Outcomes of Children in Care (January 2016).²

In Manitoba,

10.8 per cent

of children aged 6-12 years old have experienced a significant mental health or addictions issue; for youth aged 13-19 years, this rate increases to 17 per cent as reported by the Manitoba Advocate with data provided by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (date unknown).³

In Manitoba,

59 children

under 18 experience homelessness as reported by the Winnipeg Street Census (2022).⁵

In Manitoba,

74 in every 100,000

children die by suicide, and

459 in every 100,000

children attempt suicide as reported by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy (2016).⁴

Teachers are more than just pedagogical leaders. They are mentors, cheerleaders, surrogate parents and can be the caring adult that students are seeking. Students look to teachers for academic instruction and for personal validation and encouragement. Teachers who take the time to find the strengths in students; to find something to like about them contribute to a student's sense of belonging.

Every teacher is different; classrooms need to be filled with chilled, laid-back teachers. I felt like I was able to be honest and truthful in class when they were being honest and truthful in the class. It means that Ms. (teacher) thinks that I'm the most reliable, trustworthy, responsible...and I like that. I like having that support.

Public education needs every teacher to be nurturing, to celebrate uniqueness in students and to provide motivating learning environments that foster learning and well-being. Listening to students' stories, learning about the things that bring them joy, understanding their fears helps students to feel connected to their school community.

I have the power of motivation now. I have a reason to do my work now. I have

control over my path to get to the goal. (The teacher) changed me from a kid who goes to school into a student.

Ashton's journey from disconnection to empowerment reminds us that when schools focus on creating genuine connections, respecting individuality, and fostering a sense of belonging, they become places where all students, not

just some, can discover their gifts and flourish. Listening to voices like Ashton's can help us to better understand what is required to truly serve every student. ■

Ashton Schmidt is a Grade 12 student at Kildonan-East Collegiate. Tammy Mitchell is the Assistant Superintendent for the River East Transcona School Division.

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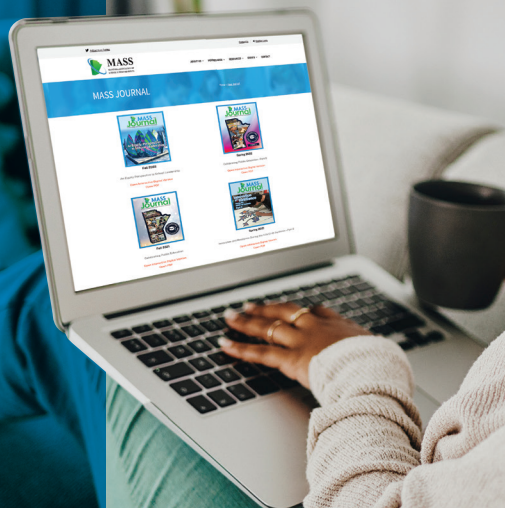
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Learning is in our Nature:

How One Manitoba School District is Embracing the Great Outdoors

By Kent Schiltroth, Michelle Long, and Laura Bennett,
School District of Whiteshell

Imagine a school where classrooms and hallways stand empty, while the sounds of excited learning echo from the forests and shores nearby. This isn't a futuristic vision – it's the reality for students in the School District of Whiteshell, where teachers have been given a simple directive for the 2024/2025 school year: "get outside."

A natural evolution

The origins of outdoor education in Whiteshell date back to the late 1970s, when educators like Brian Friese, supported by forward-thinking board members, organized the district's first adventure canoe trip on the Bird River. What began as a specialized program has since evolved into a cornerstone of the Whiteshell educational experience, touching the lives of all students.

"There are real, observable, life-long benefits to learning outdoors," explains Michelle Long, one of the current leaders of the program. "We're not just talking about 'outdoor education' as a separate subject. We're integrating the outdoors into every aspect of learning, from math and science to language arts and social studies."

Beyond the classroom walls

Today, Whiteshell's outdoor learning program is a diverse tapestry of experiences. Students might find themselves on a 220km cycle tour, a multi-day canoe trip, or engaged in activities like archery, sport climbing, and



ABOVE:

Nature has an inherently soothing effect on the nervous system. Photos courtesy of Kent Schiltroth.

LEFT:

Student Nyah with a turtle on her paddle.

orienteering. They learn outdoor cooking, practice traditional skills like tipi raising and soapstone carving, and delve into local plant identification and conservation education. In the early years, outdoor learning is rooted in the Forest and Nature School pedagogy. Young students spend time outside every day; gardening, climbing trees, scrambling over rocks, and exploring nature. This child-led approach fosters curiosity, and nurtures rich reciprocal relationships with the land, each other and their educator.

Laura Bennett is another key figure in the program. She is a recently hired Occupational Therapist and Forest and Nature School Practitioner, an addition to the district that is unique to Whiteshell. She explains, “we’re not just teaching subjects; we’re fostering skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, resilience, and collaboration. And we’re doing it in an environment that naturally promotes physical activity, social connection, and mental wellness.”

Aligning with provincial goals

The program’s success isn’t just anecdotal. It aligns closely with the Manitoba Public Schools Act and has garnered support from the Manitoba School Boards Association (MSBA). The MSBA has highlighted the significant educational, social, and health benefits of providing students with opportunities to learn in natural environments.

Whiteshell’s approach also dovetails neatly with Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning priorities, particularly in the areas of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Indigenous Education. The district has plans to expand its focus on Indigenous education, incorporating traditional knowledge and practices into its outdoor curriculum.

Outdoor learning has documented and far-reaching mental health benefits. Through outdoor learning, children learn to manage risk, to trust themselves in difficult (or thrilling!) situations, and to listen to their own inner sense of what feels safe or unsafe. Children gain practice with handling frustration and futility. They learn important lessons from nature,

such as what it means to be adaptable (e.g. plans may need to change with changing weather) and the concept of personal growth (e.g. perhaps I can’t climb that tree yet, but there will come a time when I can). These experiential learning opportunities lay an important foundation for later in life, when the risks may be bigger, and the stakes may be higher.

Putting the mental well-being of students first

Perhaps one unexpected component of outdoor learning is something that isn’t found on any report card but has a valuable role in education: joy. Children and adults both tend to be happier and more settled when out in nature. This is a phenomenon that has

Continued on page 32...



Students can move, explore, and wonder at their own pace.



Many children who have difficulty within a mainstream classroom environment thrive outdoors.



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Students exploring and learning important lessons from nature.

been observed the world over. A more settled child is likely more receptive to learning. The relationship between student and educator is different outside the classroom. An opportunity to explore nature together, to share wonder and joy builds bonds that can bring strength to the relationship, that can carry into the indoor classroom as well. As any teacher knows, the relationship they form with their students is perhaps the greatest cornerstone of student success.

Mental health promotion/resilience – through outdoor learning, children learn to manage risk, to listen to their own sense of what feels comfortable/uncomfortable, safe/unsafe, they learn to trust themselves in difficult or thrilling situations, they have experiential learning with adaptability/handling frustration or futility. These are foundational life skills, an investment in positive mental health, key to nurturing grounded and confident young people (relates to Dr. Martin Brokenleg's Circle of Courage model of resilience: Mastery,

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Belonging, Independence, Generosity and Gordon Neufeld's model of resilience re: Tears of Futility).

Community support and expertise

The program's success is a community effort. Local experts, like former teacher Merv Voth, are still very involved in the program and provide invaluable support and professional development for our current staff. To paraphrase a conversation with Mr. Voth, who used to head the program and is now a consultant: *The neat thing about Whiteshell is that the setting is perfect, and the community is already engaged in outdoor activities. Our job is to keep educators excited. We have teachers here that have been through the program as students. Educational assistants (EAs) and parent volunteers that have gone on the trips; they are our next leaders. There's a great base of community knowledge for us to tap into.*

This approach extends into the school playground, where FW Gilbert has adopted Risky Play as a way of meeting children's need for adventurous

play that pushes their boundaries and develops their physical abilities and confidence. Risky play is a dance between thrilling and exhilarating play.

Parents in our district have long been supportive of Outdoor Education at the secondary school level. As we extend our focus on outdoor learning into lower grades, parents have shown tremendous support. The Parent Advisory Council at FW Gilbert Elementary School recently concluded a large-scale overhaul of the school playgrounds, incorporating natural elements and recycled materials to create a playful landscape where students can meet their needs for developmentally appropriate risky play. The commitment and support of parents is evident from the hundreds of volunteer hours spent fundraising, designing and physically building the playground.

Looking to the future

As the School District of Whiteshell continues to pioneer this approach to education, they're aware of their unique position. "We understand that this may not be a luxury available to

all students in Manitoba, but with the beauty of the Whiteshell literally outside our backdoor, we'd be remiss to not utilize it," says Board Chair Jeff Miller. "Our Board feels strongly that we need to develop students with an appreciation and understanding of *their* connection to *their* environment. By having our teachers think 'outside' the box and listen to the environment around us, we can expand the classrooms for our students and create resilient, life-long learners."

The enthusiasm for outdoor learning in Whiteshell is palpable. As they move into the 2024/2025 school year, the district is shifting from viewing outdoor education as an "alternative" to understanding it as an integral part of a holistic learning experience. For the students and teachers of Whiteshell, the great outdoors isn't just a classroom – it's a way of life. ■

Kent Schiltroth is the Superintendent, Michelle Long is the Outdoor Learning Coordinator, and Laura Bennett is the Junior Outdoor Learning Coordinator for the School District of Whiteshell.



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