



CASSA-ACGCS
Promoting Quality Education for Our Students

Greetings from the President

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**All websites and email addresses are active.
Click them to connect immediately with
various resources.*

Most everyone
knows that student
achievement is still a
priority but cannot be
secondary to student
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It's Thanksgiving as I write this message for the November newsletter. I'm currently high on gratitude and turkey. Soon it will be Halloween and I'll be high again, but on candy and chocolate. Despite the weight gain, I find these public holidays and celebrations helpful for promoting unity and relieving stress.

Speaking of stress, even prior to the pandemic we were aware that anxiety was on the rise for students. As a result, schools everywhere have shifted to focus more diligently on student well-being and social-emotional learning. By now, most everyone knows that student achievement is still a priority but cannot be secondary to student well-being – one feeds the other.

Then, just a few short months ago, given the re-opening of schools under pressure of the pandemic and its new rules, I found myself more concerned for the wellness of our educators (particularly this summer), as we were all justifiably uncertain and anxious about how best to re-open schools.

Now, the flu and the second wave of COVID-19 appear to be upon us. Here in the Northwest Territories, we are COVID-free (knock on wood), but we are coming into the dark season; the days get shorter. Many educators will choose not to travel or will not be permitted to travel for the holiday break in December, meaning more time in isolation and between visits with loved ones at a distance. So, I worry again.

I recently read an article by Harris and Jones titled "COVID 19 – School



Curtis Brown
CASSA/ACGCS President

Leadership in Disruptive Times" (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13632434.2020.1811479?needAccess=true&>). The article does a great job of confirming the chaos and articulating why we might be exhausted given the relentless pressure on school and system leaders. The article also proposes insights into how leadership needs to "navigate a different course, to create new pathways through the disruption."

The final sentence of the article reminds of our ultimate purpose: "School (system) leaders on this journey are defined by their determination, their hope and their unshakable belief that whatever happens, whatever the cost, whatever the scale of the challenge, they will continue to do everything in their power to safeguard the learning of all young people."

If we have been good at that (for goodness sake), perhaps Santa will gift us with a vaccine.

Curtis Brown
CASSA/ACGCS President

Greetings from the Executive Director



Ken Bain

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

I hope that this message finds you and your families and communities safe and healthy. I know that many parts of the country are experiencing the second wave and that flu season is also upon us.

Hopefully, you are aware that the CASSA Board of Directors meets monthly to discuss CASSA operational matters and, more importantly, to participate in a discussion called “Cross Country Check In.” The check in has been an opportunity to update one another about the state of education in each province and territory. As you can imagine, the last many months have centred on COVID-19 and more recently the re-entry experiences.

You may also be aware that the CASSA Board has engaged in frequent Zoom meetings with its counterparts in the Canadian School Boards Association (CSBA) and its Executive Director, Nancy Pynch-Worthylake.

There are a number of themes and common issues and challenges that exist across the country that have been shared across our two associations:

- Access to technology and connectivity is uneven and is very problematic in rural and remote communities including First Nations communities.
- Food insecurity was also magnified when schools were closed.
- Transportation has been and continues to be a challenge with limits on the number of students allowed on buses along with trouble securing enough drivers and buses.
- Flexible opt-in dates for returning students wishing to engage in in-class instruction and opt-out dates for those wishing to learn remotely have presented staffing and school organization challenges.
- There have also been some positive experiences as reported by both school system leaders and elected officials:
- Ministries have allowed school districts to adopt models that reflect local circumstances.
- Of course, the local autonomy has been permitted within certain provincial and territorial guidelines and mandates from ministries of education and health.
- Co-operation, consultation and communication between and among education partners and stakeholders have been strengths in many places across the country.

Another wonderful outcome has been the development of a close connection and relationship between CASSA and CSBA. Each association shares a common interest and commitment to quality education, and we will continue to engage with each other as we move forward.

I will finish by saying that CASSA will continue to support school system leaders across the country to fulfil its purpose: to promote and support quality education for each student.

Here is a link to the Board of Directors: <https://www.cassa-acgcs.ca/Page/16>. Please connect with your provincial or territorial rep to hear more about CASSA and its work.

Ken Bain

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

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The Westman Consortia



Remote reading teacher Trevor McIntyre reads to students over video.



Sara Grona is a remote learning teacher in the Westman Consortia.

As schools reopened across Canada this fall, new or adapted ways of delivering educational services were rolled out too. *Leaders & Learners* is exploring some of the ways school system administrators are innovating to support their staff and students through the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Manitoba, for example, administrators at six school divisions are trying a collaborative approach to provide remote learning to students who cannot physically attend classes. The Westman Consortia, as it is known, supports students from kindergarten to Grade 8 who are immunocompromised or who have immunocompromised family members in their household and have been medically advised not to attend school.

The school divisions taking part are Brandon, Mountain View, Swan Valley, Southwest Horizon, Rolling River and Park West. The first four divisions are contributing staff, while the last two are contributing financial resources. All six are contributing staff to take part in an advisory committee as well as a divisional lead who works with families, home schools and remote learning teachers.

“The strong working relationship between divisions facilitates that we are all rowing this ship in the same direction.”

“The school divisions in western Manitoba have a long history of collaboration, and this is particularly evident in the COVID pandemic,” says Brandon School Division Assistant Superintendent Mathew Gustafson. “We believe that in-class learning provides the best learning environment for our students, but we also realize that some of our students were medically advised to not return to in-class learning. From an equity perspective, we saw this as an opportunity to work together to provide a quality remote learning option for those students.”

The Westman Consortia is the latest in a series of collaborative efforts that have taken place between school divisions in this area. Previous examples include:

- A French consortium with Swan Valley and Mountain View school divisions;
- An International Education consortium with Beautiful Plains, Fort la Bosse,

Rolling River, Southwest Horizon and Turtle Mountain school divisions;

- A High School Apprenticeship Program Facilitator with Park West and Mountain View school divisions;
- The Manitoba Rural Learning Consortium with a number of divisions; and
- The Manitoba Small Public Division Consortium Digital Library with a number of divisions.

Ongoing collaborations also take place in areas of professional development for staff, sharing of ideas and information between the divisions.

As of the beginning of October, there were 130 students in English Programming and 24 students in French Immersion programming from 39 different schools across the six divisions: 105 from Brandon, 17 from Mountain View, 12 from Park West, six from Rolling River, nine from Southwest

Horizon and five from Swan Valley. As parents and caregivers continue to have discussions with their medical providers, the program is experiencing fluctuations in enrolment.

The in-class learning and remote learning each had their own approach to starting the new school year. There is a long history of school startup routines for in-class learning, Gustafson says, but the remote learning startup was a new experience for students, parents and schools. This meant the first two weeks looked different for remote learning students.

“The remote learning for students who are medically advised not to return to in-class learning obviously requires the opportunity for families to consult with their medical provider,” Gustafson explains. “Divisions used the first week to determine the number of families participating in the remote learning consortia. When approximate numbers of students were determined, teachers were hired and assigned to classroom positions. Classroom teachers started to make contact with families to establish relationships and to set up the required remote learning accounts and troubleshoot any technical issues.”

The school divisions worked together on the logistical issues that arise from bringing together six different divisions, 39 different schools and 154 students. Issues ranged from items like different divisional calendars and Student Information Systems to online connection challenges and access to technology for families. Other concerns to be sorted out included communication protocols, attendance recording and report card and marking protocols.

Curriculum specialists played a large role in setting up the Westman Consortia remote learning program. In addition to developing procedures, teacher expectations, student and parent expectations and collaborative structures, the specialists provided teachers with the required technology and software to lead remote learning. They also led a collaboration day and weekly collaboration sessions for the remote learning teachers to support their lesson planning and alignment.

The Brandon School Division would like to recognize the work of those curriculum specialists and remote learning classroom teachers who are creating those best educational practices for a remote learning environment, Gustafson says. He notes that

parents and caregivers also play a critical role in the success of the remote learning consortia.

“During in-class learning, teachers take responsibility for the supervision and facilitation of learning in the classroom. In a remote learning environment, our parents take on additional responsibilities in the supervision and facilitation of learning.”

Using this kind of a collaborative approach is like building the ship as it sails, Gustafson says.

“The strong working relationship between divisions facilitates that we are all rowing this ship in the same direction,” he says. “The consortia is built on the pillars of open communication and a growth mindset. These pillars position the remote learning teachers and divisions to productively address the continually evolving needs resulting from our goal of delivering a high-quality remote learning option for our students.”

There is a true sense of partnership between the participating school divisions, despite differences such as student numbers or urban versus rural locations. Smaller divisions have expressed their appreciation for a larger division like Brandon taking the lead.

Senior administration at Rolling River School Division, for example, notes that if their division was attempting a similar program on its own, their resources would only allow for one teacher across the grades providing remote instruction in multiple curricula. By working together in the Westman Consortia, they are able to have teachers for each grade who are familiar with grade level outcomes and pedagogy providing a robust education experience for students unable to physically attend school.

Leadership at Swan Valley School Division echo that positivity about larger urban divisions working with smaller rural ones, noting the consortia is a welcome program right now and has the potential to be extremely helpful for a long time. ○

Initial Impressions About the Consortia

Leaders from all six divisions have shared their initial impressions on the Westman Consortia's efforts to roll out remote learning.

“Feedback from teachers and families has been positive. Families have expressed gratitude and appreciation for their child's opportunity to learn remotely, and families have been understanding of the fluid nature of the remote learning environment. Teachers report a large learning curve in developing remote learning lessons and facilitating online learning for their students. The teachers continually demonstrate their willingness to rise to the challenges of remote learning, supported by their own peers and divisional support personnel. Collaborative discussions requiring innovative thinking and a growth mindset have become a central component of the entire remote learning team.” – *Brandon School Division, www.bsd.ca*

“There are many complexities in realizing this collaboration, and it has been a continuously unfolding process. I am happy to say that the hard work of the teachers and staff from all school divisions involved in supporting the delivery of quality programming to the students has resulted in a successful startup.” – *Mountain View School Division, www.mvsd.ca*

“This is a fantastic option for students who are unable to attend school due to medical vulnerabilities. The remote learning consortium is providing high-quality daily instruction to students across western Manitoba. The initial feedback from students and parents in Park West has been extremely positive.” – *Park West School Division, www.pwsd.ca*

“The remote learning consortia is off to a good start. Our preliminary conversations with families provided an overview of the remote learning pilot. During these initial conversations both students and parents were appreciative for the opportunity and enthusiastic to get started.” – *Rolling River School Division, www.rrsd.mb.ca*

“Feedback from families in Southwest Horizon has been nothing but positive. Students report a sense of community within their remote classroom and are making strong connections with teachers and students from across the region. They also continue their connection with their local school through our Strategic Learning Co-ordinator and principal.” – *Southwest Horizon School Division, www.shmb.ca*

“The work this group is doing for starting from scratch is fantastic. I know our teacher has been impressed with the communication from the other divisions, and she works extremely well with her co-teacher.” – *Swan Valley School Division, www.svsd.ca*



Creative Partnership Offers Support to Students

Part one of this feature (*Leaders & Learners* Newsletter #4) explored how the Newfoundland and Labrador English School District (NLESD) and the Canadian Centre for Gender and Sexual Diversity (CCGSD) collaborated this June to help students safely connect with each other and with trained facilitators and staff through the Virtual Forum: Free to Be Me 2020 event. Junior and senior high NLESD students took part in a variety of online sessions on June 2, 9 and 16, and a session on inclusion in sports was held for educators on June 17.

Key to the district's successful transformation of a formerly in-person event to a safe and secure online gathering was the support of its Centre for Distance Learning and Innovation (CDLI). CDLI has offered senior high school distance education programming to students in rural, remote and isolated regions of the province since 2001. It currently delivers about 40 high school courses to students at 120 schools across Newfoundland and Labrador.

CDLI's mandate also includes providing resource and technical support to deliver online teacher professional learning and the oversight of K-12 technology integration initiatives. Its work is guided by the belief that learners should have equitable access to educational opportunities in a way that renders distance transparency.

Janice Rowsell, Guidance Counsellor with the CDLI, and Sherra Robinson, District Safe and Inclusive Schools Itinerant in NLESD's Western Region, recently shared their experiences as part of the team delivering safe and inclusive support to vulnerable 2SLGBTQ+ students through a remote learning model.

The roots of the virtual forum actually go back before the pandemic, when Safe and Inclusive Schools Itinerants discovered through a Google Form Survey that there were schools that, for various reasons, had no established Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).

"We realized that we had to do something creative to meet the needs of students in small rural communities who were not getting the services they were needing," says Robinson.



“That’s where the CDLI comes in,” says Rowsell.

CDLI infrastructure offered a way for students at small and remote schools to access virtual GSAs in a safe and supported online space.

“We have reach,” says Rowsell. “These are schools that already have CDLI students there. CDLI is already providing the computers and equipment in these buildings. We really eliminated barriers for students when they’re in school to be able to participate with that existing infrastructure.”

Once schools closed this spring, district staff had to look for new ways to deliver all supports and services, including the 2020 Free to Be Me forum, initially planned as an in-person event for May.

“It looked a bit different once March hit because students were no longer in those schools with the CDLI equipment,” Rowsell says. “The district really put a push on to connect families to equipment. We saw Chromebooks and internet passes being sent home for families as a way to bridge

the technology gaps for students so they could maintain some sort of connection. When it comes to CDLI, the bulk of the students who participated in the Free to Be Me forum would have been familiar with the CDLI platform because of the fact that they are already taking CDLI classes.”

CDLI had a dedicated help desk team in St. John’s working behind the scenes on registration requests. Forum presenters were provided with orientation to make sure they understood and felt comfortable with the technology side of things, and the tech team stood by for each of the sessions to offer support to all.

The event was divided into junior high and senior high sessions to avoid any barriers because of the age gap. As CDLI provides courses to only high school students, junior high students wanting to take part in the Free to Be Me forum would have been unfamiliar with the platform. To help those students connect, Rowsell created easy-to-follow documents with screen caps.

School districts wanting to create similar digital opportunities for students need to

make privacy and confidentiality the number one concerns, Rowsell emphasizes.

“When you’re working with students talking about sensitive information, creating a safe space for students is the most important feature,” says Rowsell.

Robinson notes that this is why the district’s Safe and Inclusive Itinerants chose to work with the CDLI platform when they were planning how to host virtual GSA sessions pre-pandemic. There was minimum risk of victimizing students by exposing them to problematic online experiences such as zoombombing or ghosting, for example, and the virtual space would be populated by only teachers, students and allies.

“Anyone who pre-registers for the event, we have their information and their school information,” Rowsell explains. “A person would need to log in to the platform to access the platform space. We had that extra layer of protection there. We were able to utilize existing infrastructure and use it to the best of our ability to connect students.”

Student safety went beyond the technical issues, Robinson explains, noting that staff

followed Safer Space Guidelines to make sure students felt comfortable in their decisions to share or not share and in how to share.

“Within the Blackboard Collaborate platform, there are different privileges that people have,” Rowsell continues. “There would be a moderator, like myself or Sherra, then you would have a presenter, which would be a person from CCGSD, and then you would have a participant. Depending on your role in the room, you have different levels of access. There’s a built-in chat feature where students could privately message the presenter or the teacher so they would feel free to ask questions. There’s a feature for what’s called a breakout room. That’s the digital equivalent of me and you stepping into another room for a private conversation.”

It’s important to be mindful of how vulnerable students are when they ask questions, and staff are trained in how to followup with guidance or other forms of support during the sessions or after the forum. For example, Robinson says, if a student expressed concern about washroom facilities in a school building, Safe and Inclusive Itinerants would be able to followup on that issue on their behalf.

“Our intention this year is to keep this provincial lens virtual GSA going on a more regular basis – yes to still having special events like the forum but to make sure that regardless of where the student lives that they have that lifeline there,” Rowsell says.

Rowsell works with a number of transgender students who attended the forum, several of whom expressed afterwards how happy they were that this outlet was made available for them without them needing to leave their home.

“When we take into account some mental health needs that students have, this particular method of delivery was a huge plus for them and a weight off their shoulders,” she says.

The district also had a team of about 70 guidance counsellors across the province who made themselves available to students through a toll-free number.

That was the focus of the whole shut-down, Robinson says – re-imagining learning to make sure the district is meeting the needs of all students and that student engagement isn’t just about learning for some but is about learning for all.

“That was the message coming from (NLESD Director of Education) Tony Stack’s

“When you’re working with students talking about sensitive information, creating a safe space for students is the most important feature.”

office throughout this whole shut-down period, the importance of a focus on equity for all students and ensuring that we don’t move ahead without them,” Robinson says.

Supporting virtual GSAs and working with the CCGSD to offer a virtual version of the Free to Be Me forum are just two of the ways the district supports 2SLGBTQ+ students.

“It wasn’t a coincidence the month that the forum took place,” Rowsell says. “We wanted to make sure that we recognized Pride. Through the Safe and Caring Schools policy, when it comes to gender diversity and sexual orientation, we make sure that students are given a safe space to be themselves regardless of what day on the calendar that is.”

Other ways in which the district shows that support include gender-neutral bathrooms across the province, sharing resources via the NLESD Twitter account during Pride and the NLESD homepage putting up a Pride banner.

During the 2020 virtual forum, each session began with a message from Director of Education Tony Stack in support of the community and in support of diversity.

“The message was a powerful one to start, from the head of the organization to every student who participated to every educator,” says Robinson.

It sets a powerful precedent to see that kind of commitment from the top down, Rowsell says, and it sends a clear message to the rest of the organization on how much this is valued.

Another aim of the forum was to make sure students had access to the district’s Safe and Caring Schools policy and its 2SLGBTQ+ guidelines.

“Knowledge is power,” says Robinson, “and for them to understand that if they come out at school that it’s the expectation that they have a safe place, that they lead the process. For a trans student who is transitioning, they’re at the centre of that, and we support them throughout that process.”

“Thanks to the Safe and Caring Schools policy, when it comes to a name that a student wishes to be called, all we need to do is within Brightspace, which is CDLI’s course shell, is note that they want to be called by that name. If we have a student who is transgender, we’re able to set their account to be their true name, so they don’t need to feel that they’re ostracized, or they don’t need to have the trauma of their deadname on the screen.”

As well, within PowerSchool, which is the register for student records, staff can enter a student’s name as well as their birth name so that the CDLI teacher can see the student’s preferred name.

“I had an individual, Blair Curtis, who is a trans activist and co-founder of the Corner Brook Trans Youth Group, who was part of a session we did recently explain it really well,” Robinson says. “The analogy that they used was that when they hear their birth name, it’s like getting a papercut. To somebody else it might not seem like such a big deal, but to them it really stings every time.”

It’s being cognizant of the student’s needs and putting yourself into that student’s shoes to see what their lived experience is, Rowsell says.

“That’s been pivotal from the beginning,” Robinson says. “We started with Google Forms for students and educators that basically led to the types of sessions that were offered during the Free to Be Me forum, and the data that we got out of there will help us move forward in a way that we’re ensuring we’re meeting the needs of students, even when it comes to what time of day we meet, how many times a month we meet. That all comes from the students – their voice leads the way.”

That’s what has made this initiative as successful as it’s been so far, adds Rowsell.

“It’s all about the student. It’s driven by the student. It’s what they want for it to be. When you have a student-focused lens, you’re able to make great connections, and you’re able to do great things.” ○

WSD Distributes Computer Devices for Home Learning

Submitted by the Winnipeg School Division



To assist with home learning needs, the Winnipeg School Division provided 2,166 Google Chromebooks and Apple iPads and 600 cellular-enabled iPads for families within the division.



The Winnipeg School Division supplied students with computer devices for home learning after schools closed this spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

After schools closed this spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Winnipeg School Division (WSD) provided 2,166 Google Chromebooks and Apple iPads and 600 cellular-enabled iPads for families within the division to assist with their home learning needs.

“Most of the devices came from our existing inventory in our schools, and we were

able to lend those to families with internet access in their homes,” said Tony Marchione, Acting Director of Technology.

“The remaining 600 families required both a device and internet access, which we provided through our partnership with Apple and Rogers.”

Marchione said WSD purchased 600 LTE cellular-enabled iPads pre-equipped with Rogers LTE wireless data. Rogers provided this plan at no cost for the balance of the school year (until June 30, 2020).

“Devices went right into homes and connected to the internet right away. There was no wait time for a router to be installed,” Marchione said.

Families received access to technical support for the WSD-provided devices through the division’s technical department. Online activity was also filtered and monitored by GoGuardian software, similar to SafetyNet Technologies used in schools.

WSD’s Indigenous Education and Newcomer Services teams assisted with prioritizing distribution of the technology.

“We were really focused on providing the technology first to where it was most needed,” said Rob Riel, Director of Indigenous Education. “That means we prioritized distribution in order of graduating students, high school students working on credit attainment and junior high students working on credit attainment, followed by Grades 1 to 3 and then Grades 4 to 8.”

Riel said rolling out the technology based on priority didn’t mean anybody went without.

“We ensured special accommodations were made for student populations that are low-income, Indigenous, newcomer or require additional support in literacy and/or numeracy.”

The new iPads not only helped students in the short-term but also helped the division meet its future technology requirements.

“After we got the iPads back from students at the end of the school year, the devices went back into the schools,” Marchione said. “We upgraded our devices. It’s tech evergreening. This helped support our students right away and in the long-term since we got new devices into schools.”

Marchione said providing students with home learning devices has been an interdepartmental effort, with senior administration, professional support services, computer technical support and the individual schools all contributing along the way.

“It’s been a really collaborative effort across a few different departments of the division, all working together to get technology out to students,” Marchione said. “It’s an involved process, and everyone has done outstanding work.” ○

Developing School-Based Groups as a Means of Support and Empowerment



By Holly Cobb, Seven Oaks School Division (SOSD); Shira Cohen, SOSD; Amber Anderson, SOSD; and Melanie Janzen, University of Manitoba

In 2017, Seven Oaks School Division had 566 children in care (or five per cent of their student population) registered for school in the division. At the same time, some schools reported rates as high as 10 per cent of their school's population as being children in care.

Sunshine was one of those students. She had been in one of our schools since being apprehended when in kindergarten by the child welfare authorities and placed in a foster home together with her younger sister.

As one of many strategies that schools use to provide supports for children in care, some early, middle and senior years schools in the division have started in-school groups for children in care. These groups are informal opportunities for students who identify as being in care to come together to participate in activities with the purposes of building

relationships and experiencing a sense of belonging.

In what follows, we will share our experiences from different grade levels, including how the groups were initiated and activities that we engage in. What is important to understand is that there are no “recipes” to initiate and support these groups. Rather, there is a tremendous amount of thoughtfulness, judgment and consideration given to each decision.

Our work has been informed by the Manitoba Task Force on Improving Educational Outcomes for Children in Care (2016), the Education and Child and Family Services Protocol for Children and Youth in Care (2013) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. We believe that our work between education and child welfare systems needs to be collaborative, trauma-informed and focused on the best interest of children.

This requires that our decisions are made in collaboration with others, including school principals, child welfare social workers, biological family members, foster parents, classroom teachers (as well as other school staff, such as learning support teachers, school counsellors and divisional clinicians) – and of course, with each child.

Rationale and Purpose

The purpose of the school groups is for children in care to develop a sense of belonging, to be nurtured by caring adults, to connect with other children in care, to minimize a child's sense of aloneness and to reduce the stigma associated with being in care. In fact, we have often overheard students express surprise when they find out that a fellow schoolmate is also in care.

We know that children and youth do better in school when they feel connected and cared for. Sunshine is now in high school



Children and Youth in Our Care

Educational experiences and outcomes of children in care of the child welfare system represent a significant problem. Given that both social work and educational staff share responsibility for these students, efforts to facilitate interprofessional collaboration may result in more positive outcomes for youth.

This series of four articles describes the learnings that resulted from a partnership project between the Seven Oaks School Division, Child and Family Services and a team of university-based academics in Winnipeg. The first article represents a timeline of how the partnership evolved between the education and child welfare systems. The second article describes innovative strategies that school leaders instituted to facilitate students' transitions to new schools in a manner that was more responsive to the needs of youth in care. The third article outlines how school social workers and educators partnered to create support groups for youth in care across elementary, middle and senior years. The fourth article describes the development and implementation of a senior credit course for youth in care that focused on learning and using self-advocacy skills.

We would love to hear from you! Email Kathryn.Levine@umanitoba.ca if you would like to share your comments or request further information.

but returns to her previous school to visit the adults who she got to know through the children in care group even though these adults were never her classroom teachers.

Importantly, these are *not* therapy groups nor are they intended to be sites of counseling. In fact, we set clear boundaries to discourage disclosures and oversharing in these groups. As we continue to critically reflect on the school groups, we see the powerful opportunities for these groups to help students better understand what it means to be in care, to teach them about their rights and, for some ages, to share with them how to access supports. We have seen how this has helped students like Sunshine to develop their sense of self-advocacy and identity.

Getting Started

During one of the initial children in care group sessions, when Sunshine was in early years, she produced a powerful art piece depicting her apprehension from her biological family. As she grew older, she requested the creation of a group just for middle years students so that she could be away from her younger sister who was attending the early years group.

That is how "Chill and Chat" was born. This is a space for older students to hang out

and chat about favourite movies and music. Now in high school, Sunshine has worked with the staff to initiate a youth in care group there.

In each school, there is a committee dedicated to supporting the school groups that is comprised of teachers, school-based social workers, school counsellors and/or support teachers. In some schools, school psychologists and support workers participate as well. Having a committee ensures that their work becomes part of the school planning structure.

Upon determining to start a school-based group, the committee needs to consider the following:

- How to inform respective child welfare social workers, foster families and, if applicable, biological family members about the school group. In most schools, the staff provide information (in a letter and often with an additional follow-up phone call) about the group and its purpose so as to inform the caregivers that the student will be invited to participate.
- How to invite students to participate. Students are invited individually by an adult in the school with whom the student has a positive relationship. It is important to underscore that the student has a right to decline or to participate later and that they do not have to commit indefinitely.

- How to plan for the group. It is important to consider which adults will attend and to include school counsellors and school social workers in the group meetings. Consideration also needs to be given to determining meeting times that will allow for most kids to participate, structuring the meetings, soliciting student input in the activities, providing snacks, funding for activities and if (or when) students can invite allies.
- How to start the group sessions. Consideration must be given to explaining the purpose of the group to the students, guidelines that will be created with/for the students and expectations for our interactions with each other during the group.
- How to foster a culture of caring. It is important to plan for how to respond to challenging behaviours and sensitive issues that will surface. These decisions are based on the premise that we want children to feel as though this is a place where they will feel cared for.

The Structure

Group meetings range from occurring weekly to several times per year at a variety of times throughout the day. In one middle years school group, they meet about eight times per year, during school time.

Each session begins with a mindfulness or self-regulation activity. For example, the group might start playfully with a follow-the-leader activity, clapping and pounding their hearts in a drum-like fashion, followed by a few deep breaths to get everyone grounded and present. Then there is a sharing circle where the kids respond to a low-risk question (What do you like to do for fun? What is your favourite snack?). This is followed by an activity, which takes up most of the group time.

Before the session ends, students are offered a hug or high five. The group rules are simple and include taking turns speaking, keeping stories that are shared in the group within the group, using respectful language and that expressing big feelings are okay and will be supported. Structures of these meetings vary depending on frequency of meetings, ages of students, activities planned, staff input and the needs of the students.

We have found that the children, whether in early, middle or senior years, like to be able to name the group. This usually occurs after the group has spent some time together and has developed a sense

of community. Group names often reflect an element of power, such as SuperKids.

Group Experiences and Activities

In describing the group, one student said that everyone is friendly, another said that they love the snacks, and a third said the activities are fun. Food, fun and friendship are reflected in the ways that we try to build community within the group, to ensure that kids feel safe and to plan events that are both fun and educational so that the students will want to be in the group.

In one of our high schools, the year was kicked off with a back-to-school summer camp in August, where youth in care participated in activities, developed relationships with each other, got to know the adults who worked in the high school and learned to navigate the huge school building without the hundreds of other students. During the year, the youth group participated in recreational activities such as ordering in pizza and going to movies or laser tag and also engaged in educational sessions such as:

- Life skills (e.g., pet care through the Humane Society, sessions with Career Trek);
- Community supports (e.g., Voices, Futures Forward, Macdonald Youth Services);
- Rights and advocacy by the Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth;
- Opportunities to review policies related to their rights; and
- Critical discussions of stories in the media.

In this senior years group, the youth decided that they would like to invite allies to their meetings, which has enlarged their circles of friendships and advocates.

In the early and middle years, the groups engage in crafts, make art, bake and play games. Kids often request activities that they have not had the opportunity to do before, such as going to a movie theatre and the Manitoba Children's Museum or to play paintball. Students often request holiday activities, such as making Christmas cookies and ornaments, carving pumpkins and dying Easter eggs, just to name a few.

Some groups have had guest speakers (including from Jordan's Principle¹), held special events such as Indigenous drum teachings and participated in a sweat lodge. Sometimes a special day is allocated where the students are invited to bring a friend. Some schools host evening events where students are provided with a collection of photos from their

experiences at school and then are invited to work with their foster families to create memory books. Activities are always dependent on students' interests, their ages, funding available and the judgment of the facilitators.

An interesting development has been cross-school meetings that we have organized between school groups where older groups will meet with younger groups. This has been a powerful opportunity for students to meet other children in care.

When she was younger, Sunshine loved baking cookies with the high school students. Now a high school student, Sunshine looks forward to the opportunity to visit her previous school and mentor younger students.

When students return to their classrooms after the school group meetings, we have often heard the group members tell their classmates that they are in care and explain what that means. Sunshine wanted her classmates to understand that all kids should be able to talk about their families unapologetically, explaining that she can love her foster family *and* her birth family at the same time. Classroom teachers are prepared to support and encourage such positive proclamations and discussions in their classrooms.

Some Key Supports

Schools access provincial grants, divisional funding and discretionary budgets to support the school groups. However, some groups have been creative in accessing additional funds through Jordan's Principle, local businesses and the generosity of staff members who bring in snacks and supplies.

Supporting children in our care is a part of the divisional plan, and so there has been numerous professional development opportunities (both at the divisional and school level) about trauma-informed care, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the colonial structures of Canada, residential schools and intergenerational trauma and the child welfare system, to name a few. These opportunities have allowed us to better understand systemic inequities and the structures and responsibilities of education and child welfare systems as well as for imagining possibilities for better supporting children in our care.

Divisionally, we have initiated the Kids in Our Care School Group Committee, in which teachers, school social workers and support teachers from different schools come together to articulate our purpose

and goals; share strategies, approaches and resources; discuss issues and problems encountered; and collectively plan for possibilities.

The division has hosted a number of Sharing Days that focus on initiatives to support children in care. These have been opportunities for teachers and staff, social workers, foster parents and children and youth in care to gather from our various schools. We have participated in whole group presentations as well as breakout sessions geared toward particular audiences and/or topics.

Sunshine was moved by one of the keynote addresses by a former teacher and current politician who talked about her own experience of being in care. Sunshine integrated the powerful message that one can grow up in the child welfare system and become a successful leader.

What Now? What Next?

We have seen Sunshine become more confident and someone who understands the power of her voice. She knows that the

school staff advocated for her biological family to attend school events along with her foster family. She learned that she can have access to her case plan and can ask questions if she does not understand or agree with something. She knows that she can celebrate her Indigenous heritage with pride while loving her non-Indigenous foster family. As she reflects on her school years, she can look at her memory book and know that she belonged somewhere and that she mattered.

As we reflect on our work, we see the importance of school groups in supporting children in our care. In addition to having a place to belong and develop positive relationships, we have come to realize the value for children and youth to know their rights, to learn about what it means to be in care and to understand that they can advocate for themselves.

In this way, children and youth come to see themselves as people with perspectives and stories that matter. However, we also see the need to extend our work to better support and educate foster and biological families who sometimes feel judged, ostracized or fearful

of the system. We also recognize the need for ongoing systems change and greater collaboration between education and child welfare.

In the meantime, we continue to focus on our day-to-day interactions with the children in our care so that like Sunshine, they can all feel valued, seen and heard. ○

Holly Cobb is a classroom teacher at Seven Oaks School Division (SOSD) in Winnipeg. Shira Cohen is a School Social Worker at SOSD. Amber Anderson is the Vice-Principal at SOSD. Melanie Janzen is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Manitoba.

Reference

1. Jordan's Principle is a child-first principle ensuring First Nations children get the services they need when they need them. See: https://fncaringociety.com/sites/default/files/summary_of_jordans_principle_orders_2019_update.pdf



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1123 Glenashton Drive
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Tel: 905-845-4254
ken_bain@cassa-acgcs.ca
www.cassa-acgcs.ca

Articles written by Tara Wittchen

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309 Youville Street
Winnipeg, MB R2H 2S9
Tel: 866-999-1299
editor@matrixgroupinc.net
www.matrixgroupinc.net