

# Summer 2025 Leaders & Learners

The official magazine of the Canadian  
Association of School System Administrators

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Michael Helm  
CASSA/ACGCS President

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**Equity, inclusion,  
and diversity are  
crucial themes.  
The importance of  
gaining strategic  
alignment through  
a purposeful  
vision, mission  
and set of values.  
The importance  
of creating  
an inclusive  
and equitable  
educational  
environment for all  
students.**

---

**H**ello system leaders! I have had the opportunity to look at the key elements of this latest magazine and you are in for a treat. This edition is packed with insightful articles and features that are sure to inspire and inform you as we continue to strive for excellence in our educational systems. The themes covered in this magazine really stood out for me, as I am sure they will for you.

One of the central themes of this edition is innovation and creativity in education. It explores various ways to make learning more engaging and enjoyable for our students, particularly in areas tied to science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM). It goes into innovative teaching methods and creative approaches that can help spark students' interest and curiosity in these critical subjects. From hands-on experiments to integrating technology in the classroom, enhancing the learning experience.

Another exciting topic covered in this edition is outdoor learning. As we recognize the importance of connecting students with nature and the environment, the magazine features articles that highlight the benefits of outdoor education. Outdoor learning can improve students' physical and mental well-being, foster a deeper appreciation for the natural world, and provide unique opportunities for experiential learning. Whether it's through field trips, nature walks, or outdoor science experiments, adding outdoor learning into the curriculum is crucial.

In addition to traditional educational methods, there is a growing trend of esports in schools. Esports has gained significant popularity among students and is being recognized as a valuable educational tool that can help develop important skills such as teamwork, strategic thinking, and problem-solving. It addresses the potential and opportunity for the power of play in educational settings.

Equity, inclusion, and diversity are crucial themes this issue. Articles cover the importance of gaining strategic alignment through a purposeful vision, mission, and set of values; the importance of creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment for all students; and exploring various strategies and initiatives that school districts and boards can implement to promote diversity and ensure that every student has the opportunity to succeed.

There is also an emphasis on the importance of alignment within school districts and boards. One article discusses how effective collaboration and communication among different departments and stakeholders can lead to better outcomes for students. The article highlights successful examples of alignment in various school districts, showcasing how coordinated efforts can drive positive change and improve the overall educational experience, whether it's through shared goals, joint initiatives, or regular communication.

The magazine is truly an inspiring resource for system leaders across Canada. It covers a wide range of topics that are relevant to today's educational landscape, from innovation and creativity to equity and inclusion. The magazine provides valuable insights, practical tips, and real-world examples that can help educators and administrators enhance their practices and create a more engaging and inclusive learning environment for all students.

I encourage you to take the time to read through the articles and reflect on how the ideas and strategies presented can be applied in your own schools and districts. Together, we can continue to innovate, inspire, and make a positive impact on the lives of our students.

I want to thank all of you who have taken the time to share and contribute for the benefit of others.

Thank you for your dedication and commitment to education.



**Reg Klassen**  
CASSA/ACGCS  
Executive Director

**A**s a retired Superintendent, I have found myself reflecting recently on my many years of educational leadership, and the word legacy keeps coming to mind. To that end I have begun looking for resources that will help me better understand what it all entails. I have discovered that legacy is a profound and deeply personal concept, beautifully explored in *What is My Legacy?* by Martin Luther King III, Arndrea Waters King, and Marc and Craig Kielburger. This is the first book I picked up and it delves into the idea that our legacy is not just what we leave behind, but what we actively build and contribute to in the present. It prompts us to think about the values, actions, and lessons we instill in those around us.

Drawing on the wisdom of this book, legacy can be seen as a reflection of our character and our commitment to the greater good. Martin Luther King III and the other authors remind us that creating a meaningful legacy doesn't require grand gestures or extraordinary achievements. Rather, it's the small, consistent acts of kindness, justice, and courage that ripple outward, touching lives we may never meet.

A legacy is shaped by how we show up in our communities – by standing up for equity, fostering compassion, and inspiring change. It's the empowerment we offer others, the hope we ignite, and the love we pour into our relationships. As the book emphasizes, legacy is not confined to a single moment; it's a lifelong journey of making intentional choices that align with our values.

Ultimately, *What is My Legacy?* challenges us to ask: How will I be remembered? What will I stand for? But more importantly, it reminds us that the power to create a meaningful legacy lies in our hands today. Legacy isn't just about the past or future – it's about the impact we make right here and now. Through purposeful living, we each have the ability to leave an indelible mark on the world.

As the school summer break approaches across the country, I hope you've set aside time for rest and rejuvenation. Leading a school system is a demanding role that requires immense energy – energy that deserves to be replenished. Building a lasting legacy happens moment by moment, day by day, through consistent effort and care. Keep this in mind as you plan your time away from the fast pace of system leadership. Simply put, be kind to yourself and embrace the care you truly deserve. Wishing you a wonderful summer!

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# Building Tomorrow's Workforce: OCSB's Innovative Approach to Experiential Learning

By Sean Kelly, Ottawa Catholic School Board

Ontario's educational landscape is evolving, with a renewed emphasis on preparing students for a diverse range of post-secondary pathways. Recognizing the critical need to equip young learners with the technological knowledge, experiential learning, and practical skills demanded by today's economy, the Ottawa Catholic School Board (OCSB) is proactively implementing initiatives that directly align with the Ministry of Education's priorities for student success.

While a traditional focus on classroom academics and instruction remains central to our board's success, equipping students with experiential learning opportunities has become a priority. Allowing students to learn marketable skills, gain industry training, and explore independent projects aligns with our deep learning focus and allows variety for the various learning styles within our student population.

The OCSB's Social Entrepreneurship Program (SEP), brings K-12 learners and their educators together with experienced business mentors to tackle real social issues. Students select a "charity" partner and work to develop a product, specific service or a community awareness campaign and build out a social enterprise. All profits from the sale of products or services are donated to the selected charity partner. The projects are initiated between September and November, and a celebration is set up in May/June, allowing the initiatives to extend beyond the general timeline of the traditional classroom experience.

The program began in 2014 with five schools and six educators. We now involve over 900 students, 40 educators, and 30 community

mentors. Over \$20,000 has been raised for the various charities that classes have chosen. Students learn project initiation, development, and organization skills which will serve them well in their eventual chosen field. The feedback regarding student learning from our educators and community partners is exceptional.

In addition to the practical experience offered by the SEP program, the OCSB's Elite Skilled Trades Academy (ESTA) provides work experience and apprenticeship opportunities to students within the high school setting. The purpose of the OCSB's Elite Skilled Trades Academy is to offer students centralized, in-house training, courses, and industry-recognized certifications directly related to their chosen skilled trade.

This integrated approach allows students to simultaneously earn high school and valuable college credits through dual credit programs, while gaining access to paid apprenticeship opportunities. A primary driving force behind the Academy is the desire to increase the number of Registered Apprentices in Ottawa to effectively meet the growing market demand. A number of economic factors have contributed to a need for an increase in skilled trades participation. This includes the need for 100,000 skilled workers in the next 10 years to meet growing demand in construction, manufacturing, and other sectors in Ontario.<sup>1</sup>

By providing college-level training within the familiar and comfortable environment of a high school, the ESTA program aims to ease the transition for students to post-secondary education. The program incorporates a gradual release into the college setting through Dual Credit and Level 1 apprenticeship courses, providing a supportive and structured pathway. A significant advantage is the opportunity for

students to explore a specific trade in depth before making a full commitment to an apprenticeship, allowing for informed career decisions. Notably, students enrolled in the Academy will complete their final semester at their home school, ensuring they can graduate alongside their peers. With an overabundance of skilled trades employers in the region, graduates of the Academy will be well-positioned for successful careers.

The Elite Skilled Trades Academy has implemented its programs in phases. Phase 1 focused on Masonry and Carpentry trades. The Masonry program is supported by a strong partner, the Ontario Masonry Training Centre (OMTC) and is unique in the Eastern Region of Ontario. The Carpentry program is envisioned as a two-year program spanning Grades 11 and 12, incorporating dual credit courses at Algonquin College, participation in a Construction Specialist High Skills Major (SHSM) program, and culminating in a Registered OYAP Apprenticeship.

The Academy has retrofitted our existing St. Paul High School to offer Apprenticeship Level 1 training in both Brick and Stone Masonry and Carpentry, significantly expediting a student's apprenticeship journey. ESTA plans to offer Automotive Repair for the 2025/26 school year with possible expansion into other in-demand skilled trades such as robotics, plumbing, electrical, hairstyling, and hospitality. The ESTA program is grateful for the support it receives from the various partners who continue to offer training, resources, and advice.

The OCSB continues to look toward experiential learning opportunities for our students K-12. Younger learners can get a taste of practical, project-based activities while our older students can use their high school learning as a







Students from St. Mark High School donate to the CHEO Foundation.



Students posing with sweaters that all say "Save Young Lives."



Students participating in the Elite Skilled Trades Academy Masonry Program at St. Paul High School. Photos courtesy of Sean Kelly.

springboard to a vocation in the trades. We will continue to seek unique learning experiences for our OCSB students. ○

*Sean Kelly is the Superintendent of Student Success (Intermediate/Secondary) in the*

*Ottawa Catholic School Board. He has previously worked as an intermediate/secondary teacher, Vice Principal, and Principal. He has a passion for student pathways and allowing learners to bring voice to their own learning styles and interests.*


#### Reference:


1. Niagara College Canada. (2023). Addressing the Skilled Trades Crisis. <https://support.niagaracollege.ca/addressing-the-skilled-trades-crisis>.

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# Battle River School Division Deepens Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation

By Stephen Hoyland, Sigrid Sollbach and Rhae-Ann Holoien, Battle River School Division

**B**attle River School Division (BRSD) continues to deepen its commitment to Truth and Reconciliation by weaving Indigenous-led learning and partnerships into the fabric of our schools, classrooms and communities. At the heart of this work is a commitment to equity, inclusion, and cultural understanding – rooted in respect, relationship, and authentic engagement with Indigenous knowledge and communities.

BRSD is advancing Indigenous education and reconciliation, moving beyond symbolic gestures into long-term systems change. Cultivating meaningful partnerships with Indigenous leaders and organizations has been core

in this critical work. Integration of cultural learning throughout our division begins with collaboration between BRSD and key organizations and individuals. This willingness for cultural sharing and teaching has been integral to our commitment to Truth and Reconciliation.

BRSD appreciates and values its partnerships. Support and collaboration with neighbouring First Nations community Maskwacis has been essential in our reconciliation journey. During fall 2024, we formed a partnership with Kevin John, respected Indigenous facilitator. John, founder of *They Build Bridges* and advocate for Truth and Reconciliation, has guided our leadership team in a deeper understanding of meaningful action toward reconciliation.

Anchored in the *CASS Guide to Relationships and Learning with the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta*, this powerful learning demands critical

reflection, responsibility, and purposeful action, connecting BRSD to local and provincial Indigenous communities and ensuring that reconciliation remains a living and growing commitment in every BRSD school.

Cultural learning has encouraged school administrators to reflect on their role in reconciliation and equip them with the tools required to lead impactful change. As one BRSD principal shared, “This work is about more than just learning – it’s about taking action to create meaningful change in our schools and communities.”

These learnings are embedded into BRSD’s operational and educational work. BRSD is thankful for the mentorship of its Indigenous partners to guide division cultural activities and experiences within our classrooms.

Cultural activities that are celebrated at BRSD schools include traditional beading, smudging, ribbon skirt creation, drum and moccasin making. These items and experiences tangibly connect students to Indigenous heritage, while deep discussions that ensue provide the time to explore Indigenous worldviews,



Students and staff participated in a tipi raising ceremony at Round Hill School on September 19, 2023. Events like this provide meaningful, hands-on learning rooted in Indigenous teachings and cultural tradition. Photo courtesy of Anna Radchenko.

Round Hill School students stand alongside the garden during harvest. Photos courtesy of Round Hill School.



history and traditions, connecting students in an inclusive learning space of respect and diversity.

These Indigenous connections and activities have practical curriculum components that are infused into classroom learning. Students apply subject area learning through the creation of cultural artifacts and while practicing Indigenous games. Through this process, students show pride in sharing their finished products while meeting curriculum outcomes, cherishing the opportunity to participate in authentic Indigenous experiences.

While cultural experiences are integrated into the curriculum and classroom, they are also supported in outdoor spaces, connecting people with the land. BRSD encourages students to participate in Indigenous methods for land-based learning. Students also explore the natural world in nearby areas: Miquelon Lake, walking trails, Round Hill community garden, and at a BRSD outdoor classroom at Sedgewick school.

Round Hill School students, staff, and community members engage in a collaborative garden project. Students engage deeply with the land by using the Three Sisters method and Indigenous agricultural practices. Other schools

have the opportunity to visit and learn alongside them.

In May, our third annual BRSD powwow was hosted at Viking School. Over 800 students, staff and community members engaged with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, dancers and singers, for a day of song, dance and cultural learning. Students donned and showcased ribbon skirts and shirts, jingle and fancy dresses, and cultural items that were crafted with pride at school. This event was powerful in creating cultural exchange, healing spaces, and connections to traditional learning.

This event is part of a broader, ongoing division-wide initiative to host powwows and cultural learning across BRSD schools, ensuring that all students have opportunities to engage meaningfully with Indigenous culture and traditions. Through these celebrations, BRSD is committed to fostering sustained cultural connections, building understanding, and honouring Indigenous ways of knowing throughout the school year.

Superintendent Rhae-Ann Holoien shared BRSD's commitment to cultural learning. "This year, with the guidance of our Knowledge Keeper in Residence, Indigenous Support Worker, and expanding our connections with Indigenous

communities, we've been able to embed culture and tradition more intentionally in our classrooms and beyond," said Holoien. "Truth and Reconciliation is an ongoing journey, and we are committed to providing students and staff with resources that foster cultural understanding and strengthen relationships within our school community."

BRSD is guided by its vision, education plan, and core priorities: Learning Success for All, Enhance High Quality Learning and Working Environments, and Well-Being. The division's commitment to Truth and Reconciliation is embedded within its work, with equity and inclusion being central to purposeful decision-making and planning. Its commitment is only strengthened by community-grounded partnerships and leadership. While on the journey toward reconciliation, BRSD is listening, learning, and honouring the truths of the past. ○

*At the time of submission, the authors held the following roles with Battle River School Division: Stephen Hoyland, Assistant Superintendent - Education Services; Sigrid Sollbach, Director of Education Services; and Rhae-Ann Holoien, Superintendent of Schools.*



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# Dream, Play, Imagine:

## Creating a School Where Learning Comes to Life

By Michelle Britt, École St. Anne School; and Ashley Floyd, Mila Flynn, and Jo-Anne Lanctot, Living Waters Catholic Schools

**T**he sun rises, and with it, our school begins to fill with the sound of laughter, the hum of excitement, and the energy of eager children ready to explore. You can feel it the moment you walk through our doors – this is no ordinary school. At École St. Anne, we've created a space where children don't just learn – they dream, they play, they imagine. Every corner of the school is filled with purpose and joy, where curiosity is nurtured and every question is welcomed.

École St. Anne is grounded in the belief that play is the work of children – giving them the skills they need to be prepared for their future success. Through play, our students explore their curiosities while developing creativity, innovation, teamwork, empathy, and critical thinking skills, all while gaining a deeper understanding of the world. Through hands-on activities and immersive experiences, we empower our students to become active participants in their own education. We strive to create an environment where students don't just receive knowledge, they experience learning.

Each day at École St. Anne begins with morning discovery – an opportunity for students to participate in unstructured exploration through which they investigate their interests, questions, and take ownership of their learning. Morning discovery allows our students to question while investigating their curiosities, fostering a sense of wonder, a collaborative community and a lifelong love of learning. Our students are also invited into learning through the use of provocations – thoughtfully designed activities or arrangements of items intended to spark the imagination while setting the stage for learning and creativity. A collection of natural objects, a thought-provoking question, or an interesting image entices students to actively engage and discover while responding to the learning experience.

At the edge of the École St. Anne property is a small forest, one of our most vibrant learning spaces. In the forest our students create a world of their own, from forts to pirate



*Inviting young minds to wonder, explore, and create; provocations that spark curiosity and joyful learning in play-based classrooms. Photos courtesy of Michelle Britt.*



ships, camping scenes, and amusement parks; the possibilities are endless as students enter with their simple materials (sticks, chalk, cardboard and rocks) and their imaginations. Through the seasons the forest offers an abundance of materials to explore; ideas to inspire art and opportunities to explore symmetry, patterns, relationships, and number sense. In the forest, students are scientists, exploring the seasons and the impact of human activity and plant/animal life cycles. Here, learning is rich as students foster a deep connection with nature and become aware of the importance of environmental stewardship.

At École St. Anne, outdoor learning is fundamental to our identity, providing rich opportunities for students to connect with nature and explore concepts across the curriculum. Throughout the year, we plan various outdoor learning weeks where students are immersed in nature as our schoolyard and community become a living classroom for students. Students explore ecosystems, conduct scientific investigations, and engage in collaborative projects, all while developing a profound appreciation for

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**We strive to create an environment where students don't just receive knowledge, they experience learning.**

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the natural world. This experience demonstrates how learning extends beyond the walls of a classroom, offering a rich and engaging environment to explore concepts through direct experience. This week-long experience, inspired by the concept of project-based learning, challenges students to

*continued on page 16*



*The Imagination Room was transformed into a wild jungle adventure, where creativity was swinging from the vines and learning roared to life!*





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address a guiding question through outdoor exploration and creative problem-solving.

Our commitment to play based, student led learning is perhaps best exemplified by our “Curiosity Crew” a group of eight enthusiastic Grade 3 students who took on the challenge of reimagining our imagination room. The Curiosity Crew, driven by their curiosity, decided on a jungle theme. They embarked on a journey of research, immersing themselves in the wonders of the rainforest. They studied the diverse flora and fauna, the animals and the cultural traditions of jungle inhabitants.

Armed with their newfound knowledge, they set about transforming the imagination room into a vibrant jungle paradise. They built a reading hut, a cozy retreat for literary adventures boasting different genres of reading materials. They constructed an animal research station, complete with detailed fact sheets and interactive displays, where students could delve into the lives of jungle creatures. They created a cascading waterfall, complete with a fishing area, fostering imaginative play and problem-solving skills. They designed a dramatic play center, a stage for storytelling and role-playing,

where students could bring their jungle adventures to life.

Every element in the room was meticulously thought of and created by the Curiosity Crew. They created murals, constructed animal models, and designed interactive displays. They poured their hearts and souls into creating a space that would inspire their peers to *Dream. Play. Imagine.*

The transformation was remarkable. The imagination room, once a blank canvas, now pulsed with the vibrant energy of a living jungle. Students flocked to the space, eager to become jungle explorers and embark on their own imaginative journeys. They fished in the waterfall, conducted research at the animal station, and acted out jungle dramas in the play center. The Curiosity Crew’s project became a testament to the power of student-led initiatives and the transformative potential of play-based learning.

This project exemplifies our commitment to fostering a vibrant learning community where students are empowered to take ownership of their education. By dreaming big, playing with purpose, and imagining endless possibilities, our students develop the critical

thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills they need to thrive in an ever-changing world.

At École St. Anne, we believe that education is not just about acquiring knowledge, it’s about igniting a passion for learning that will last a lifetime. We are committed to creating a school where every child can Dream, Play, and Imagine while realizing their full potential. ○

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*Michelle Britt, Assistant Principal at École St. Anne School, brings 17 years of experience as an educator within the Living Waters Catholic Separate School Division, the same division where she completed her own K-12 education. Ashley Floyd, Director of Teaching and Learning with Living Waters Catholic Separate Schools, brings 16 years of experience to her current role. Mila Flynn is a passionate educator with eight years at Living Waters Catholic Schools; she is currently in her first year as Principal. Mila cultivates a learning environment where children dream, play, and imagine each day. Jo-Anne Lancot is Superintendent of Living Waters Catholic Schools where she started her career as a Kindergarten teacher 38 years ago.*



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# Celebrating Innovation: The Success of EMSB's STEAM Program Pilot

By Valerie Honig and Jason Bixby, English Montreal School Board

Over the past two decades, the government of Quebec has emphasized the importance of effective problem-solving skills within the public school system. Recognized both locally and internationally, this focus is reflected in key competencies identified in science and mathematics curricula. In 2015, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) added 'collaborative problem solving' as a fifth criterion for assessment, alongside science, reading, mathematics, and financial literacy. This underscores the paramount importance of equipping school-aged children with robust problem-solving abilities.

However, today's youth increasingly engage with the artificial world rather than the physical one, leading to fewer opportunities for hands-on 'making' activities. This shift highlights the need for students to develop essential 21st-century skills that complement effective problem-solving. In response to this need, the Educational Services Department of the English Montreal School Board (EMSB) launched its innovative science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) program in 2016. This program aims to foster interdisciplinary, collaborative, problem-based, process-driven, authentic, community-oriented, and 21st-century skills acquisition.

## The birth and expansion of the STEAM program

Initially, the STEAM program was introduced in two elementary schools. The following

year, it expanded to include fifteen schools – thirteen elementary and two secondary. Teachers received extensive professional development opportunities, and funding was allocated for the establishment of makerspaces. These efforts advanced the STEAM agenda, but it became clear that a more hands-on, localized approach was necessary to induce the systemic paradigm shift required for the initiative to thrive.

## The three-year pilot project at East Hill Elementary

In early 2023, EMSB decided to target one pilot STEAM school in a three-year initiative. East Hill Elementary was chosen for this pilot project, which aimed to weave STEAM into the fabric of education, fostering a dynamic, collaborative, and future-ready learning environment. The first year of the pilot included



*A group of students showing off honey from their bees project. Photos courtesy of Anna Villalta.*



*Teachers working together to build common themes.*

five full days of professional development for all teaching staff, from K4 through Grade 6:

- Day 1: Curriculum Mapping
- Day 2: Generating Common Themes and Problem Statements
- Day 3: Developing a Learning and Evaluation Situation (LES) for Term 2
- Day 4: Developing an LES for Term 3
- Day 5: Reflection and Planning

Additionally, bins containing commonly used items for the 'making' process were assembled for homeroom teachers. By the end of the three-year initiative, the goal was for STEAM education to become the primary pedagogical model employed throughout the school year, across all grade levels. STEAM would eventually be seen as integral to the school's identity, with teachers continuing to engage in this approach beyond the three-year timeframe.

### Celebrating the success of year one

As of June 2024, East Hill Elementary successfully completed the first year of the three-year commitment. Teachers were busy creating a bank of LESs that espoused the tenets of STEAM as interpreted by EMSB. These LESs were designed to be embedded into East Hill's pedagogical modus operandi, serving as

alternatives to or complementary with traditional methods of instruction. Fourteen new LESs were created and implemented last year, addressing problems such as:

- Limited Access to Clean Water (Cognitive Development and Social & Emotional Development)
- Too Much Waste (Science and Visual Arts)
- The Bees are Disappearing (Science and Math)

By the end of year three, a complete program of STEAM-oriented LESs will be available for teachers to choose from as they prepare for the school year.

### Expansion and future goals

The success of East Hill's first year led to the inclusion of two additional schools in the initiative. In September 2024, Pierre Elliot Trudeau and Honoré Mercier committed to the three-year initiative and began developing their respective LESs for the current school year. EMSB aims to establish STEAM education as a core pedagogical approach across all grade levels, fostering a dynamic, collaborative, and future-ready learning environment.

The EMSB's STEAM program represents a significant step forward in education,

addressing the need for effective problem-solving skills and hands-on learning experiences. The success of the pilot project at East Hill Elementary and its expansion to additional schools is a testament to the program's potential to transform education. By embedding STEAM into the fabric of education, EMSB is fostering a dynamic, collaborative, and future-ready learning environment that prepares students for the challenges of the 21st century. ○

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*Valerie Honig, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., and Jason Bixby, B.Tech., B.Ed., M.Ed., MBA, are STEAM educational consultants for the English Montreal School Board (EMSB). With extensive experience in integrating the STEAM pedagogical approach, whereby the focus is on solving real world problems using engineering design, they have been instrumental in developing innovative teaching strategies that enhance both student engagement and learning outcomes. Together, they collaborate with teachers and administrators to implement STEAM initiatives across the EMSB, providing professional development, resources, and support to ensure that students receive a well-rounded education that prepares them for the future.*



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# Ensuring Success for All Students Is the Right Thing To Do!

By Christopher Usih, Richmond School District

Public education serves the greater good by ensuring that all students have opportunities to succeed. This commitment reflects a profound belief that every learner, regardless of background or identity, can reach their full potential when provided with the right environment. It aligns with the principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), as the ultimate goal is to improve outcomes for every student in the public school system.

Educators and school boards increasingly face resistance to their efforts in sustaining EDI initiatives, often mischaracterized as “woke” by critics. This term, which originally described an awareness of social injustices, is now used to undermine policies and individuals who advocate for EDI. Such critics conveniently overlook the necessity for systemic reform within our educational system and the historical and current contexts of racism, discrimination, and oppression faced by Indigenous peoples and other marginalized communities, including racialized groups and members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Despite the growing opposition, school boards and system leaders must remain unwavering in their commitment to serving all students, without exception.

At its core, EDI is about fostering inclusion rather than giving preferential treatment. It acknowledges systemic barriers and the need to address learning and achievement gaps to ensure equal opportunities for all students. Creating a sense of belonging and safe, inclusive learning environments is crucial for student success. This commitment is not only a moral duty but also an economic necessity, with wide-reaching implications for future workforce development and a robust democracy. Achieving this goal requires ongoing collaboration with staff, students, families, and all levels of government, because ensuring success for every student is a cause worth fighting for!



*Students at Cook Elementary collaborate on a classroom activity, building teamwork and communication skills in a vibrant learning environment. Photos courtesy of Evan Cunningham.*



*Students at General Currie Elementary engage in their work with support from their principal during classroom time.*

In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education and Child Care has prioritized Indigenous students, children and youth in care, and learners with disabilities and diverse abilities as groups in need of additional support. Recognizing the intersectionality and diverse identities within these groups is essential, as highlighted in the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) report. The TRC's 94 Calls to Action urge educational

institutions to implement culturally relevant curricula, enhance educational attainment levels, and support the preservation of Indigenous languages and cultures (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 7). One example of such integration is the inclusion of the First Peoples Principles of Learning in B.C. schools. These principles are incorporated into learning plans and prominently displayed on posters in classrooms,

learning spaces, and school district administrative buildings across the province.

Ensuring fair and equitable treatment is enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. According to the Charter, equitable treatment is both a legal requirement and an obligation. Consequently, school boards and system leaders must implement clear and definitive policies that uphold the fundamental rights of every student and employee. Like other districts, this priority is at the heart of the Richmond School District's mission, vision, values, and strategic priorities. It forms the foundation for the well-being of students and staff, as well as the organization's overall effectiveness.

For system leaders to be effective, they must collaborate with staff, students, parents, and other partners to ensure an unwavering commitment

to equity and inclusion. By sustaining equitable and inclusive environments, we affirm our dedication to student success and human flourishing. As leaders, we must communicate clearly and assert that racism, hate speech, harassment, and discrimination are entirely unacceptable in our schools and workplaces. We must take prompt and appropriate action whenever these issues arise. Neglecting this can undermine public trust and compromise meaningful relationships.

This important work requires educators and school boards to undergo professional development to identify biases and confidently manage discussions about racism, discrimination, and oppression with staff, students, parents, and the community. By addressing discomfort directly, they can engage more effectively in these essential yet challenging conversations.

In closing, equity and inclusion are essential for creating an environment where every student can flourish, regardless of their background or identity. It is not about providing special treatment; it is about ensuring that all students have the opportunities they need to succeed, which is both a moral and ethical responsibility. ○

*Christopher Usih is Superintendent of the Richmond School District in British Columbia. He previously served as Chief Superintendent in Calgary and held various positions within the Toronto District School Board, including teaching, administration, and superintendent roles. His teaching journey began at a First Nations community school in northern Manitoba. Born in Nigeria, Christopher is a fervent advocate for public education, contributing to national and international forums to promote its benefits and the importance of democracy.*

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# The Power of Play

By Steven Tian, Ashley Fullarton, and Jeremy Blais, Holy Rosary High School; and Vince Orioux, Jessie McEachern, and Nigel McCarthy, Lloydminster Catholic School Division



*Students and staff of Holy Rosary High School enjoying learning esports. Photos courtesy of Jessie McEachern.*



*Students cheering each other on.*

Imagine you are 15 years old in a small prairie town, and you have big dreams in the tech industry. Holy Rosary High School's esports team and Game Design & Strategy courses are a window into the world that allows young people to reach across borders and outside what was possible only five years ago. Today, in our schools, students compete internationally with global reach. They meet peers who share their passion and gain critical skills in collaboration, competition, and strategic thinking – skills that the economy of the future demands. They excel on the provincial, national and even the international stage while staying rooted here in Lloydminster. Our esports athletes have the potential to be noticed by some of the most prestigious schools in the world, all while competing for their high school here in East Central Alberta.

---

**The recreation level trains and competes across the school and during the day students are coding and designing video games on multiple platforms.**

---

They are working without limits, innovating beyond borders, and they are doing it in our Publicly funded schools.

This year more than 100 young people tried out for our esports team in its third year of competition. For three months the competition team will host events and beam their best around the world. The recreation level trains and competes across the school and during the day students are coding and designing video games on multiple platforms.



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Students learn more than just the language of computing – they are entrepreneurs, designing and selling their own games or building audiences in the thousands by narrating their gameplay on YouTube and other emerging platforms. Through these courses, they can also work toward scholarships, not only for studying Computer Science but to play on College and University gaming teams.

To those who grew up in the Atari era, the surface view of this too often pervades discussion. Young people are showing us that they see pathways to success before the curriculum has even been written. According to the most recent report from the Entertainment Software Association of Canada, we are preparing students to work in one of 821 studios across the country or start their own in an industry with an average salary of more than \$100,000 dollars per year shared by nearly 35,000 employees. All this in a business which contributes 5.1 billion dollars to the National GDP – a number that would place it just between the national GDPs of Barbados and Fiji – and one that is growing at nine per cent year over year.

Our students practice gaming, but also spend time on nutrition, physical workouts and maximizing their mind by looking after their body. They

practice formally multiple times a week and wear a team hoodie, the same way that basketball and football do. In the hallway, these athletes talk about their wins in this new forum for student success. These opportunities are not just about gaming – they are about shaping the future. The skills students develop through esports and Game Design & Strategy prepare them for careers that don't yet exist, in fast evolving industries. In our schools, students are not just players; they are creators, innovators, and pioneers in a digital world.

The *Power of Play* lies in how we empower young people with bridges between their dreams and the future, at the Lloydminster Catholic School Division this new bridge is built of pixels and light, paved in limitless new opportunities! ○

*Steven Tian is an Educator and eSports Coach, Ashley Fullarton is an Educator and Athletic Director, and Jeremy Blais is the Principal for Holy Rosary High School. Vince Orioux is a Superintendent of Learning, Nigel McCarthy is the Director of Learning, and Jessie McEachern is the Communications Coordinator for Lloydminster Catholic School Division.*

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# Your Presence Matters!

## Improving Student Attendance Through Enhanced Community Partnerships

By Dustin Swanson and Amanda Olson, Prairie South Schools



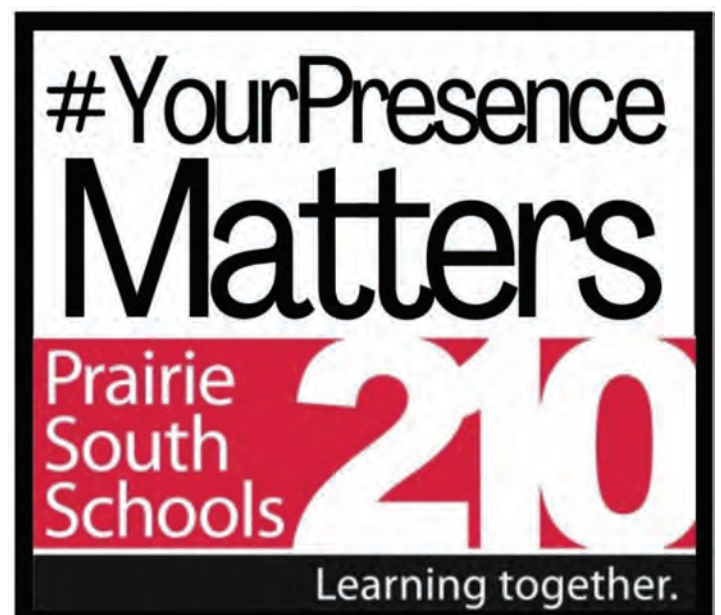
*A picture of the community hockey team with the “#YourPresenceMatters” Zamboni in the background.*

According to a recent CBC news article, experts suggest that the pandemic has had a lasting impact on attitudes toward school attendance.<sup>1</sup> Years later, many school districts continue to face challenges in improving student attendance. However, Prairie South School Division is taking a positive and unique approach to promoting regular attendance.

As a leading school division in Saskatchewan, Prairie South is committed to making student attendance a top priority. Research and experience clearly show that poor attendance can have serious negative effects on a student’s mental health, well-being, and academic success. Increased stress and anxiety, lower self-esteem, behavioural challenges, family strain, and even depression are all linked to poor attendance.

This year, Prairie South’s goal was to send a clear and caring message to students, families, and communities: **#YourPresenceMatters**. We want every student at school every day, because we believe our schools are the best places for students to grow – personally, academically, socially, and emotionally.

In the past, efforts to address poor attendance included warning letters and disciplinary measures. After seeking feedback from administrators,



*The #YourPresenceMatters decal.*



teachers, students, and trustees, the division identified a need to shift the messaging away from the negative impacts of poor attendance and instead emphasize the benefits of regular attendance. This approach aligns with research findings by the Ad Council Research Institute which found that messaging is most effective when it is positive in tone, focuses on how school develops children holistically, avoids chastising or shaming parents, and is delivered by someone who parents and caregivers trust the most.<sup>2</sup>

Our renewed approach to messaging and supporting student attendance in Prairie South is built on the statement that #YourPresenceMatters. A strategic campaign was launched last fall at a community event where thousands of community members gathered to raise funds for youth mental health. Shortly after, a division-wide letter was sent to families about the campaign and the true purpose behind it. A comprehensive social media approach was used to share #YourPresenceMatters stretching to each corner of our large geographical division. Window decals are displayed in our schools and are provided to any local business and organizations willing to help spread the message. Early in the campaign, senior administration jokingly commented, “We will know the campaign is working when a #YourPresenceMatters decal finds a place on a Zamboni in one of the several communities we serve.” That challenge was taken up by our school leaders – and has already been achieved in two rural communities.

We want our message to spread throughout all our communities because we think that if we all talk about the positive impacts of regular school attendance, we can better support

students and families in building positive attendance habits. The decals serve as a constant visual reminder that Prairie South cares about our students and values their presence at school.

Thanks to the generous support of River Street Promotions, Prairie South was able to purchase these decals as well as t-shirts to help promote the importance of regular school attendance. River Street Promotions also sponsored several public transit bus passes for students in the Moose Jaw area reducing the financial burden related to public transportation. Other partners continue to come on board with the campaign including the City of Moose Jaw. At the May City Council Meeting, all council members wore a #YourPresenceMatters t-shirt, and the mayor highlighted the important message of regular school attendance to our broader community. We are building momentum in our campaign and look forward to partnering with more organizations and communities during the next school year.

Early results show that this renewed approach is making a difference. Division-wide attendance has risen to **91.4 per cent**, up from **89.4 per cent** last year, across our mix of urban and rural schools, at both elementary and high school levels. Despite a harsh prairie winter with numerous bus cancellations, the chronic absenteeism rate (more than 10 per cent absent) has decreased by three per cent. Overall, the attendance data shows a positive trend, and the campaign momentum continues to build, with decals and stickers appearing in more and more locations.

Prairie South is excited to continue forming partnerships with municipalities, community

organizations, and local businesses as we work to improve student attendance and well-being. Our #YourPresenceMatters campaign is helping spread the message that school is the best place for students to be – every day. From stickers in local businesses to large decals on Zambonis at the local rink, we’re making it known: your presence matters! ○

*Dustin Swanson is Superintendent of School Operations for Prairie South Schools. He has 27 years of experience as a school administrator, consultant, and teacher. Dustin is passionate about learning and creating schools that are innovative and inclusive. Amanda Olson is a Superintendent of Learning and she has 21 years of experience as a superintendent, school administrator, and teacher. She holds a Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Regina and a Master of Education degree (Educational Leadership and Administration) from the University of New Brunswick.*

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# Creating Optimal Classrooms for Learning and Development: A Path Forward

By David Tranter, Ph.D., and Ashley McLellan

**O**n nearly every measure, the landscape of education has become more complex and more challenging. Student attendance and engagement are down. Classroom behaviour is increasingly disruptive. Achievement in literacy and numeracy has declined. Mental health concerns among young people continue to rise. Educator stress and burn-out are at an all-time high. Most concerning of all, disrespect and aggression toward educators – from both students and even some parents – has become alarmingly common.

It's tempting to place the blame for these problems on the COVID-19 pandemic, but the reality is that many of these troubling trends began long before 2020. In our well-meaning efforts to support the academic and social-emotional success of students, we have at times moved away from evidence-based practice. In doing so, we've created conditions that are increasingly difficult for both teaching and learning. The result is an educational environment that often feels fragmented, exhausting, and misaligned with its core purpose.

These problems were not created by education alone. Broader social changes – including economic instability, rising inequality, and shifting cultural norms – have placed strain on virtually every public institution. But education is unique in its potential to respond constructively. Rather than waiting for direction from elsewhere, the education sector must take the lead. It must reassert its role, clarify its priorities, and reclaim the authority and coherence it has lost.

Here are 10 essential steps to begin that work:

1. **Reaffirm academic achievement as education's primary goal.** If we are truly committed to equity and long-term student success, we must ensure that all students – especially those who face personal or systemic barriers – receive a high-quality academic education. This means holding all students to high academic standards and giving them the tools and support they need to meet those expectations. Academic achievement must remain at the centre of our educational mission, not in competition with social or emotional learning, but as its natural complement.





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*Dr. David Tranter has been teaching and working in mental health, well-being, and education for over 30 years. Photo courtesy of Ashley McLellan.*

## 2. Create classroom environments that support both learning and development.

Children and youth thrive in settings that are both warm and structured. Research consistently shows that two dimensions – responsiveness (warmth, acceptance, and attunement) and demandingness (expectations, monitoring, and clear limits) – are essential for optimal development. These elements aren't opposites; they are mutually reinforcing. Classrooms that blend compassion with consistency create the ideal context for learning.

## 3. Support students through authoritative teaching.

Authoritative educators combine care with clarity. They are attuned to their students' emotional needs while also providing the structure and expectations that help students succeed. This approach is not about control – it's about guidance. The research is robust: authoritative teaching improves academic outcomes, strengthens student engagement, reduces behavioural issues, and enhances students' sense of belonging. Simply put, it works.

## 4. Avoid permissiveness, even when it feels easier.

In recent years, many educators have faced pressure to accommodate student and parent preferences by relaxing rules or lowering expectations. While this can feel supportive in the short term, permissive practices ultimately fail to equip students with the skills they need to thrive. Real support means preparing students for the demands of life – not shielding them from it.

## 5. Recognize that permissiveness harms well-being.

Structure is not the enemy of well-being – it is the foundation of it. Clear rules and fair consequences help students feel safe, valued, and understood. Without them, students may feel uncertain,

disconnected, or anxious. Likewise, educators suffer in permissive environments where their professional boundaries are routinely challenged, and their authority undermined.

## 6. Maintain high expectations to promote student independence.

There is a misconception that high expectations stifle self-expression. In reality, they are the scaffolding that helps students build autonomy, resilience, and self-confidence. Students – especially those who struggle with self-regulation – need routine and accountability to learn how to manage themselves and succeed independently. Consistency is not rigidity; it is reliability.

## 7. Reduce unnecessary pressures on educators.

Too often, education systems respond to problems by adding new initiatives, programs, and responsibilities without removing outdated or ineffective ones. This accumulation leads to work intensification, with educators left juggling too many priorities and too little time. To restore energy and focus to the profession, we must streamline, clarify, and protect the essential work of teaching.

## 8. Trust and empower professional expertise.

Listening to students and families is critical – but so is knowing when to lead. Authoritative educators gather input and build relationships but ultimately make decisions based on their professional knowledge and experience. We must move away from the idea that teachers should be passive responders to external pressures. Instead, we should support them as confident, capable professionals.

## 9. Ensure optimal environments benefit everyone.

Educators often feel pressure to prioritize student needs at the expense of their own well-being. But a classroom

cannot be truly optimal if the adults in it are depleted. Educator well-being is not a luxury – it's a prerequisite for effective teaching. When teachers are supported and healthy, students benefit too.

## 10. Build authoritative systems to support authoritative educators.

No educator can do this work alone. School systems must align their policies, practices, and leadership models with the principles of responsiveness and demandingness. From classroom to boardroom, we need shared language, shared vision, and shared responsibility. Systemic support makes it possible for educators to hold the line – both with compassion and with conviction.

As difficult as this moment in education may be, it also offers an opportunity. We know what works. The research is strong. The experience is there. Now, we need the courage and clarity to act. It's time to refocus, streamline, and reassert the core purpose of education. Because right now, the system is failing not only educators, but students as well. ○

*David Tranter's book, "The Third Path: A Relationship-Based Approach to Student Well-Being and Achievement" has been adopted widely by educators across Canada. He is the 2023 recipient of the Ontario Principals' Council Outstanding Contribution to Education Award joining past recipients such as the Honourable Murray Sinclair and Dr. Chris Hadfield. For more information about his work, go to [www.thirdpath.ca](http://www.thirdpath.ca).*

*Ashley McLellan has been a passionate supporter of relationship-based approaches in education for over 18 years in Canada and internationally. She supports system leadership teams in implementing evidence-informed practices to support student and adult well-being.*

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