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## Introduction

> Committed to partnership between school staffs, parents and communities, [community schools] are the right way to "do" school. In short, community schools represent an excellent investment for society to make. They are especially helpful where a significant number of children are "at risk," but their value is universal and their philosophy should be promoted throughout the province.[1]

The idea of community schools as a means of supporting challenged populations has gained currency in recent years. As the mandate of education expands from provision of traditional academic instruction to recognize the complex needs of children in the twenty-first century, the self-contained model of the school becomes increasingly inadequate to meet the needs of students. In addition, the recognition of the importance of parental involvement in children's schooling leads to the corollary recognition that parental well-being is an important contributor to student achievement. From there it is a short step to recognize that a healthy community is a healthy learning environment, and that community and school collaboration has real potential for improving all aspects of student achievement. Community collaboration may include both involvement with other formal service providers (e.g., health care agencies, social service agencies) and with informal groups such as parent coffee gatherings.

Within Canada, the Manitoba Ministry of Education, Citizenship and Youth and the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education have established important initiatives to foster the development of community schools in their provinces. Many provinces are now funding such community schools as a more comprehensive approach to programming for disadvantaged children and youth. Despite the innovativeness of this concept, however, little Canadian research has been undertaken to examine the inner workings of community schools and the efficacy of integrated service delivery. Approaches to working with Aboriginal learners and their families in these settings could be especially instructive due to the rapid growth of this segment of Canada's school-aged population.

As a step towards filling that research gap, "Forging Partnerships, Opening Doors: Community School Case Studies from Manitoba and Saskatchewan" provides case studies of six community schools in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and presents

discussion of the findings and recommendations from that body of research. All schools serve high percentages of at-risk children in settings that vary from inner city to northern isolation. All schools have a significant presence of Aboriginal students, with both Métis and First Nations populations represented.

We visited all six schools between January and June 2008, working in collaboration with an advisory committee in each province that reviewed the final report. Sites were selected by provincial authorities, with the intent of presenting a selection of inner-city, rural, and northern contexts. Schools varied in their enrolment from 170 to 414 students. All schools included elementary grades; two rural communities studied also included a secondary school program.

Key players at the school, division, and community agency level were interviewed individually or in small groups, using interview guides developed for each category of informant. These participants were identified in most cases by the school principal and the community school connector. In all, some 130 interviews and focus groups ranging in length from 30 to 90 minutes were conducted, involving over 160 respondents in the data collection process.

These findings were triangulated with regional statistical data; information regarding the district and provincial contexts in which these schools operate; and a broad assortment of relevant documentary evidence, such as school policies and mission statements, budgets, schedules, organizational charts, annual program reports, brochures, newsletters, newspaper articles, websites, meeting minutes, grant applications, staff lists, attendance data, achievement data, scrapbooks and photo albums, job descriptions, and student projects.

Further analysis was then conducted to examine patterns across the six sites according to the themes that emerged, documenting strengths, challenges, and common issues, with particular attention to promising practices. The lessons learned were linked to the community schools literature and research on Aboriginal schooling, and framed in a set of recommendations for policy and practice.

## Overview

Case studies in this report are based on themes drawn from the existing community schools literature. Each study provides a description of the distinctive context in which the school operates, including location, community demographics, and length of time in operation as a community school. Operating characteristics were identified, including governance, implementation issues, range of services delivered and partnerships supporting those services, and funding sources. The report identifies indicators of success and existing challenges, and lists a number of recommendations arising from the case studies.

The research questions that were addressed were:

- How are programs developed to meet community needs?
- What governance structures and adaptations are required to function in an integrated services environment?

**Table 5.1: School Demographics**

| School Name | Location | Grades | No. of Students | % Aboriginal | School Division |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alonsa | Alonsa, Manitoba | K to 12 | 175 | 85 | Turtle River School Division |
| David Livingstone | Winnipeg, Manitoba | K to 8 | 300 | 90–99 | Winnipeg School Division |
| Gordon Denny | Air Ronge, Saskatchewan | Pre-K to 6 | 247 | 90 | Northern Lights School Division |
| Sacred Heart | Regina, Saskatchewan | Pre-K to 8 | 339 | 78.3 | Regina Catholic Schools |
| Stobart Elementary | Duck Lake, Saskatchewan | Pre-K to 6 | 190 | 60 | Prairie Spirit School Division |
| Stobart Secondary | Duck Lake, Saskatchewan | 7 to 12 | 170 | 60 | Prairie Spirit School Division |
| Wapanohk School | Thompson, Manitoba | K to 8 | 414 | 97–98 | Mystery Lake School Division |

- Which agencies are involved as partners with schools and how do these relationships work?
- What are the indicators of success and how are they operationalized?
- What special challenges do schools face?
- What promising practices can be identified in these schools?

## Schools in the Study

The research examined six provincially operated community schools: three in Manitoba and three in Saskatchewan. Their locations range from the inner cities of Winnipeg and Regina to isolated rural and northern communities.

The majority of the schools are elementary schools; one case study in a small rural community includes both an elementary and secondary school. Most are small to mid-size community schools, with enrolments varying from 170 to 414 students. All schools serve a high proportion of Aboriginal learners, with percentages varying from 60% to 99%. A demographic overview of the schools in the set is presented in **Table 5.1**.

The six sites reflect a continuum of development along the road to maturity as community schools. Depending on (or in some cases preceding) the year of conferral of official status, their histories as community schools range from very recent (2 years) to a lengthy and established record of service exceeding 25 years.

# Findings

Schools were at varying stages of progress at fulfilling their mandates. They differed widely in their responses to their contexts and situations. This variance appeared to be influenced by the number of years that schools had been in operation, as well as by the characteristics of the communities in which they were situated.

Regardless of the diversity among the schools, a critical shared characteristic was the leadership and vision of the school principal, whose capacity to network with the community was a key factor in the effectiveness of collaboration. Despite differences in leadership styles, each principal conveyed the message that all children could learn, that all families had worth, and that their school would do whatever was necessary to support at-risk students.

The role of the community school connector or community school coordinator was an essential element in the functioning of the community school. It was seen as beneficial if persons holding these roles had experience in community development, a strong understanding of community development principles and a background in social work or education. Combining these characteristics with a well-established familiarity with the school community was optimal, but a challenge to find and to maintain.

Partnerships were found to be fundamental to community school programming. Varying in complexity and purpose, they originated from a number of sources. Some partnerships emerged to identify an issue, while others emerged to address an issue. Some were developed to provide services in a way that could not be accomplished by a single entity. Although the issues may not have been uniquely school-related, the school became the locus of service provision. Partnerships varied in their degree of formality, from very structured to informal.

The social complexities of the communities were substantial, and varied from one school to the next. Recognition of varieties of family structure and the attendant implications was critical. Many children were part of extended households, or were raised by grandparents. Schools that had been functioning as community schools for longer periods of time seemed better able to address these complexities as they arose, as did those with the presence of a cohesive community infrastructure.

The physical structure of the school itself emerged as a critical element in community school effectiveness. Lack of space hinders community inclusion and reduces options for school programming.

Monitoring results of programs, although time-consuming, was found to be a necessary means of ensuring effective use of resources, which must include programs to close the achievement gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged learners. Elements of success to be measured include academic success, improvements in student attendance, and student behaviour (e.g., reductions in suspension rates, graffiti, and neighbourhood misconduct), and increases in participation in positive activities, such as sports and other extracurricular programs.

Cultural activities relevant to the Aboriginal populations were seen as essential to community involvement. These included Aboriginal language instruction and, in some schools, curricula, traditional activities such as storytelling and an urban trapline, and acknowledgement of elders as contributors to cultural learning.

Perhaps due to the nature of the communities, although there were formal school governance councils prescribed by the provinces, many of the study's parent/caregiver respondents preferred informal mechanisms of governance, which they found more inclusive and responsive to their needs.

At the provincial level, partnerships were enabled through legislation, funding, the establishment of governance structures, interministerial agreements, and the provision of need infrastructures. At the school division level, infrastructure, funding, leadership, and the establishment of governance structures were also enabling factors for the development of community schools.

## Challenges

Health issues were a significant challenge to the populations served in this study, whether inner city or in smaller communities. Students' nutrition was often poor, and nutrition programs in schools and the community were, in some instances, limited by available space and staffing. Students and families alike suffered high rates of obesity, diabetes, dental caries, lack of physical activity, and mental health and addiction issues.

The pervasive and persistent effects of residential schooling on Aboriginal populations were apparent in these schools. Families were often reluctant to interact with schools, to trust systemic interventions, and had been deprived of their sense of self-efficacy and cultural worth. Schools were required to extend repeated efforts to build trusting relationships with community members.

**Table 5.2** (page 86) provides examples of school programming to promote parent/community involvement, illustrating a number of strategies to draw families in, supports to enable their involvement, and education for family/caregiver groups.

Regardless of location, issues of access to school and after-school programs were present. Transportation, child care, and financial barriers all made it difficult for families to take part in programs and services. Within inner-city schools, travel to and from school often presented safety issues. In remote communities, many students had to travel long distances to and from school, and bus schedules limited their ability to take part in before- or after-school programming. Many parents either did not own their own vehicles or lacked money to operate them. These issues of transportation, child care, and finances exacerbated the chronic lateness and attendance challenges faced by most schools.

Poverty had an effect on student stability. Many families changed housing frequently; many children moved from one family to another. Either circumstance

**Table 5.2: Illustrative Examples of School Programming to Promote Parent/Community Involvement**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Strategies** | • Coffee corner (Gordon Denny)<br><br>• Community room—coffee and newspapers (David Livingstone)<br><br>• Facility use for birthday parties and family events (Gordon Denny)<br><br>• Home visits (many schools)<br><br>• Kookum bingo (David Livingstone)<br><br>• Nutrition bingo (David Livingstone) |
| **Supports** | • Most schools provide meals for the entire family as an incentive for participation<br><br>• Child care is provided or children are welcome at almost all activities<br><br>• Often children of multiple ages are able to participate in the same event to relieve child care issues<br><br>• Transportation or transportation assistance is available in many instances |
| **Educational Programs** | • FAST and FAST works (most sites)<br><br>• Families in the kitchen (Wapanohk)<br><br>• Family days (Stobart)<br><br>• Hello Parents Conference (Wapanohk)<br><br>• Adult education (David Livingstone) |

can result in children changing schools and facing changes in programming, expectations, and relationships. In addition, teachers and other school staff often changed schools frequently, which again challenged the school's ability to form trusting relationships with students and families.

Sparsely populated areas presented challenges to community capacity in terms of the availability of agencies or community groups with which to form partnerships. Similarly there was a dearth of qualified personnel to fill vacancies established by new partnerships or departure of staff from an existing position.

## Recommendations

Community schools can work in a variety of settings, and can make a difference in the lives of children and youth. The process of doing so is, however, complex, vulnerable to change, and unique to each setting. The following recommendations emerge from the study:

### *Culture*

Community schools should continue to reflect the cultures of the prevalent populations of their settings. They must evolve to meet changing needs in developing

communities. Among Aboriginal populations, instruction and programming must intentionally reflect the Aboriginal perspectives and culture represented within the student population.

A continued commitment to increase the number of qualified Aboriginal administrators, teachers, and other school system personnel is necessary. Skilled Aboriginal educational assistants should be encouraged and supported if they wish to gain teaching credentials.

The contribution of traditional leadership (elders, other family members, and other community members) should be acknowledged and drawn on throughout all stages of development and maintenance of community programs. Caution should be exercised, however, in equating the representation of ethnically Aboriginal presence among school staff with the recognition of Aboriginal culture. Conversely, the cultural proficiency of non-Aboriginal staff should not be automatically dismissed on the basis of their ethnicity.

In-service training in cultural proficiency is necessary for all staff working in community schools. It should be made available on an ongoing basis, both to enable continued development and to address staff turnover.

### Key Personnel

The role of the community school coordinator/ connector should be flexibly defined at provincial and division level in order to enable a match between a specific school and its context. In some instances, the role may be filled by more than one person, and the needs of the program met by bringing skill sets together. If external coordinators/connectors are to be brought into communities, it will be necessary to familiarize them with the community and culture into which they are introduced through a gradual process of mentorship and integration.

In addition to the duties common to all school administrators, administrators of community schools have distinctive responsibilities for a variety of programs and partnerships that require their physical presence and often their familiarization with new areas of practice. Additional support for school leadership is, therefore, essential. Examples of this type of support include additional clerical capacity, reduced teaching load for administrative teams, division-level support in grant writing, or staff to address community and cultural issues.

Formal, specialized training in community school administration will be a prerequisite qualification for administrative positions. The development of a training program on community school administration should draw on the expertise and experience of administrators of successful and established community schools and on the emergent body of research and evaluation of these schools.

### Governance

Both formal and informal governance mechanisms should be recognized and supported. Informal governance mechanisms and their role in decision making must

not be subordinated to formal, often externally imposed, governance roles. Authentic participation of community members requires the use of both mechanisms.

Optimally, community members should feel comfortable accessing both formal and informal mechanisms. Participants in formal governance should recognize that the apparently informal practices within the community may have structures of which they are unaware and which they should honour.

### Capacity Building

As the number of community schools increases and as the practice of community schools matures, participants in the schools (staff, families, and community partners) should meet regularly and visit one another's sites in order to share learning, and to compare and gain understanding of their experiences. Resources must be made available by school divisions and provinces to enable this level of collaboration.

It is not consistent with the philosophy of community schools to have an exclusively "top-down" model of professional development. Any central administration of community schools should have the facilitation of interaction among schools as a high priority.

All school staff will benefit from training in skills specific to community schools, such as cultural proficiency and networking, either in preparing for a community school placement or in the transition from an established school to community school status.

Staff recruitment and turnover in remote and inner-city schools is a recognized issue in all schools, and will be true of community schools. The evidence obtained in these case studies suggests that community familiarity and program success are associated with staff retention. Clearly, this association may be circular, as program success will benefit from the presence of a stable and trusted staff. Additional research into this area is indicated, to clarify directionality of effect and to identify factors that support retention. Familiarity and program success may be a particularly telling factor in northern and remote schools.

Although teachers may face challenging conditions in an inner-city school, they are likely to be able to spend time in parts of the city that are more salubrious. A teacher in a small, northern community has no such option, and may feel the need to change schools as a means of returning to a more familiar environment.

### Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring of indicators of success should be a priority at the school, division, and provincial levels in order to evaluate existing programming and to direct its future course. It should include:

- direct evaluation of specific programs and their associated effects at a student level;
- evaluation of schooling effects within a student population; and
- evaluation of community benefits associated with the community school programming.

**Table 5.3: Measuring Success on Multiple Indicators**

| | |
|---|---|
| **Academics** | • Graduation rate<br><br>• Achievement, e.g., reading scores, math achievement, standardized testing<br><br>• Course/grade completion<br><br>• Use of technology |
| **Participation** | • Attendance rates<br><br>• Course or program selection<br><br>• Program completion<br><br>• Return to school |
| **Student Behaviour** | • Changes in suspension rates<br><br>• Reduction of vandalism<br><br>• Participation in extracurricular activities or programs<br><br>• Reduction in high-risk activities, e.g., pregnancy, drug use, involvement with the law<br><br>• Neighbourhood behaviour |
| **Community Involvement** | • Donations<br><br>• Volunteers<br><br>• Community support |
| **Satisfaction Levels** | • Informal and/or questionnaire responses |
| **Transitions Beyond School** | • To post-secondary<br><br>• To employment<br><br>• To apprenticeship and/or other training programs |
| **Examples of Other Indicators** | • Student, e.g., teacher reports of increased student involvement, motivation, and/or satisfaction<br><br>• Parent, e.g., complaints to administration and/or district; positive parental involvement<br><br>• Staff, e.g., sick leave; volunteer activities<br><br>• Community, e.g., presence in school; community interviews |

A partial list of possible indicators for data collection about community school programming is shown in **Table 5.3**.

Program evaluation needs to remain sensitive and responsive to shifts in community capacity. There may be a stage at which school delivery of a specific program will cease to be necessary because of growth in community capacity. In this case, school resources will be freed to offer increasingly rich programming in other areas.

The record keeping essential to monitoring and evaluation is often seen as a time-consuming exercise in compliance by school staff, who face many pressing demands on their limited time. It will be essential to build time into their schedules for these activities, and to make the payoff of record keeping apparent. Documenting outcomes is an important part of professional learning and development as well as a means of examining and justifying the effects of student programming. Recognition of this fact should be associated with providing all staff the needed time to keep records and to review and learn from them.

## Assigning Resources to Programs

When assigning resources to programs, considerations must be made of factors such as:

- logistics
- community capacity
- maturity of program
- match with established services
- suitability of facility

Funding should be available to address learning gaps that result from family mobility and ensuing interruptions in instruction. Districts need to establish a range of effective strategies to address the effects of student mobility.

Targeted funding should be considered to address barriers to full participation in recreational and cultural programming that would otherwise only be available to children from higher income families.

Benefits from recreational and cultural programming may be obtained from participation in either traditional Aboriginal activities or from those commonly offered in the mainstream community.

The existence of adequate infrastructure and a critical mass of service agencies should be recognized as a precondition of establishment of a community school.

## Conclusion

These case studies illustrate the many challenges addressed through the intervention of community schooling. Little Canadian research has been undertaken to examine the inner workings of community schools and the efficacy of integrated service delivery—schools as the hub of interagency outreach services designed to improve opportunities for their students and families. The information from this study, especially the approaches to working with Aboriginal learners and their families in community school settings, can be instructive for many Canadian educators and policy-makers.

# Endnotes

1 Quotation from Task Force on the Role of the School Interim Report, August 2000, as cited on the Government of Saskatchewan's Ministry of Education website <**www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/branches/pol_eval/community_ed/commschools.shtml**>.