



# Gathering Place

"The virus should not be feared, it should be respected"  
-Elder



## Manitoba Gathering Place Townhall

Thursday, October 22, 2020  
2:00 to 4:00 p.m. CDT

### Findings Report

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#### Background

As part of its “Gathering Place Best Practices” Initiative, the First Nations Education Administrators Association (FNEAA) is holding a series of virtual town halls with First Nations Education Administrators from across the country. The goal of the “Gathering Place Best Practices” Initiative is to provide a place for First Nations Education administrators and educators to gather virtually, share stories, network, and plan ways to effectively respond to COVID-19. The initiative will enable administrators to access timely best practices and possible ways to navigate the complexities and shifting environment triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This initiative is in keeping with FNEAA’s mission and vision. FNEAA’s vision is “Balancing the interconnectedness in education, rooted in First Nations languages, cultures, traditions and self-determination under First Nations’ control of First Nations education.” Its mission is to be a “gathering place for First Nations education administrators to share information, collect and share ideas and enhance capacity in education, certification, professional development, partnerships, systems development and services, mentoring and conferences”.

The Manitoba virtual town hall was held on Thursday, October 22, 2020 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. CDT. Seven First Nations Education administrators and educators participated in the town hall using the Zoom platform. The guest host for the town hall was Davin Dumas,

Director of Education, Fisher River Cree Nation. The town hall also featured two presentations from: Bev Fontaine, Director of Education, Opaskwayak Cree Nation; and Greg Halcrow, Director of Education, Pimicikamak Cree Nation (Refer to the Agenda in the Appendix). Simon Brascoupe from FNEAA facilitated the session.

### **Question 1. Main Needs and Priorities**

One of the key needs and priorities identified by participants is dealing with the learning gap and assessing where students are especially in basic classes such as English and Math and then putting interventions in place. With limited teaching time the focus is on core subjects with many schools opting for a blended approach where students work from home part of the time and come to school part of the time; this is done in varied ways across schools and communities.

*We're still playing catch up so our priority is doing assessments on` students seeing where they are and putting interventions in place to help them catch them up.*

Other schools are dealing with a quick return to remote and online learning. They had planned on a blended approach to the return to school which meant that students would be attending school in person for part of the week but in some instances, COVID-19 cases meant that they were forced to go immediately to remote learning and they are rushing to make the quick transition. For others, poor internet connectivity and lack of computer devices in homes, means that they are already moving on getting school packages out earlier than had originally been planned. For example, in one community the local internet provider is at capacity and cannot support new clients. While schools are trying to open a virtual school for high school students who have not had any classes in the past two weeks, there is also a need to train parents who are not computer literate. There are fears that the homework package program, which is often the only real option in some cases, is not enough to keep students engaged. For example, one school sent out 480 packages last March when the schools were forced to shut down but only 20 packages were returned from students.

### **Question 2. Health and Safety**

Participants spoke about the impact both on the physical and mental health of students because many activities such as sports program have been severely limited due to COVID restrictions. Most schools have developed health and safety protocols to ensure maxim safety for students, teachers and staff. This includes ensuring that students respect social distancing, the creation of classroom bubbles, the addition of cleaning staff and cleaning procedures.

These new protocols have often meant that sports activities and other cultural activities have had to be curtailed. Similarly, younger children find it very difficult to respect social distancing rules and participants worry about the long-term impact of constantly being reminded that they should not get too close to their teachers or classmates. The worry is that this will only increase their anxiety.

One participant also spoke about the anxiety of the parents. Although they have opened with a blended learning program in which two groups of students alternate the days in which they come to school, many parents still refuse to send their children to school. Of 200 students, only 30 will show up and the numbers may vary from day to day depending on the local situation with the virus.

### **Question 3. School Operations**

Most participants spoke of their plans for the return to school. In some instances, schools have opted for a blended approach where students come to school on off days. This has meant less teaching time and so the priority has been put on teaching the basic core courses. In other instances, participants spoke about how their plans for returning to the classroom have been upended by cases of COVID being declared. Schools have been forced to a complete remote and online learning framework. This premature return to remote and online learning has presented them with new challenges and has increased the anxiety and stress felt by teachers.

*Getting our teachers computer literate in terms of using the online platforms is a big need right now and I'm sure they're going to do well. It's been a rough start for some of them, and then our needs change because of this pandemic... It's a totally different environment now because you're in a building where there's no children. You're so used to having them around you and just working with them and talking with them. It's not something all of us here will ever get used to but that's where we're at right now. It's exciting and scary at the same time.*

In one community, because of the loss of the school building, students have been dispersed into different facilities including the community arena for grades 5 to 8 and high school students at the Vice Chief Regional Centre. School routines have been severely disrupted. Students have been forced to start early and on top of this, there have been cases of COVID-19, and program delivery had to shift quickly to remote and online learning. The community is in the process of getting fiber optics and has ordered 400 Chromebooks for students. The community is in lockdown. The community has three principals and some certified teachers who teach core subjects, however, local people with specific backgrounds are being asked to teach land-based activities, Cree language,

music and art. Class sizes have been reduced to approximately 12 students. By using local people, students are learning about their history and identity; this has been very positive.

#### **Question 4. Learning Gaps**

Several participants talked about the steps they are taking to address the learning gaps that may have resulted from the schools being closed since March. Most are undertaking assessments of students in core subjects – English, Math—for example and trying to develop individualized teaching plans to help students catch up. They are also encouraging their teachers to be more flexible and to work as teams. Teachers at different grade levels work together and teach the same things at the same time; it helps teachers plan and enables them to be more innovative. It is also proving to be beneficial in the event that teachers are absent due to illness. The common team approach is also helping with the transition to remote learning.

With no connectivity, one participant also talked about how teachers are using their Facebook group to upload materials to teach core subject matter, Cree language resources and weekly school packages. Another spoke about how they are making YouTube videos to allow students to watch or download their lessons in off-peak hours. They also offer homework packages to help students who want to learn at home.

*“The videos are being watched, about two times as many times as there are students in that class. Most of them are being watched between four in that afternoon and four in the morning. In some ways the fact that we don't have live connections with the students has worked in our favour... Whole families are able to watch the videos together, which helps with differentiation without a student in grade five and six having to feel bad about learning, let's say, at a grade one or two level. They're just helping their younger sibling, and they're connecting with these same instructional videos. So it's really been a good thing to bring the families together.”*

With a blended learning approach, teachers have to teach the same materials twice. To the first group on one day and the second group on the next day. This has meant that there is a need to prioritize the curriculum and so core basic subjects are being taught although efforts are being made to continue with cultural activities.

#### **Question 5. Mental Health**

Mental health remains the number one concern of participants. One participant spoke about how a rash of suicides within the community has intensified the concern. The

participants spoke about what they are doing to help deal with the anxiety. Plans include expanding land-based learning because it allows students to get outside. Others spoke about training teachers in mindfulness in order to help them to manage their stress and anxiety. For those schools that are already in full online or remote learning, there is a concern that further social isolation will have an impact on students. They are trying to come up with virtual ways to break the social isolation and have students connect with each other if only virtually.

On the other hand, some have found that the blended approach with its smaller class sizes has meant that students have created their own circles with a family atmosphere. Teachers can provide students with more attention and monitor the anxiety of students and identify those students who may be experiencing problems.

### **Question 6. Online Learning**

As previously mentioned, online learning has become more critical now that COVID-19 cases have been reported in some regions. For many, poor internet service poses a real challenge; this is especially the case for remote areas. One participant mentioned that his community purchased MiFi – wireless WIFIs that work with cellphones to provide internet services to families and homes and is negotiating to ensure that families have unlimited data services. Others are still looking for funding support to help with internet service in the school and in the homes. The community has cell service, but the problem is with cell data plans. As for devices, we heard about how schools are trying to ensure that students have at least a Chromebook for middle school and high school students. Plans are underway to equip younger students with I-Pads if possible and then plans are being made to find ways to provide support to parents who are not as comfortable with computers.

### **Question 7. Anticipation of what will work well**

Participants have noted that one of the positive impacts of the smaller class sizes and the blended approach has been a sharp decline in behavioural issues. Teachers have more time to spend with students.

*The reduction in class size has had an astronomically positive benefit on the students in our school. There are no classroom management behavior issues anymore. Students are focused and engaged. That is one of the really great outcomes of having reduced classes for us.*

Others have mentioned the dedication of staff and collaboration with parents.

## **Question 8. Stories, Practices and Innovations to Share**

Participants shared their admiration for the commitment of staff. They have been very supportive and instrumental in getting classes up and running. This kind of buy-in from teachers tells the students that they can do it.

*I think one of the biggest things is the diversity of our staff, being able to switch from not having any experience for online teaching and being able to pick it up as a challenge and start implementing it right away. They were able to get packages ready and send them out. They were able to put online content together and deliver it to students. For the most part, there's been a few hiccups, but nothing major. So I have to say, kudos to our staff for being able to do that so efficiently.*

Others have noted that with the changes to a blended model, everyone has pulled together, including parents and this is due to good communication. Good communication by all means is an important piece that should not be forgotten. Some participants mentioned that they used Facebook, other social media to communicate with parents but that in other instances they created student success officers who check on students and parents to see how they are doing and address any attendance issues.

Other participants stressed the importance of collaboration with other learning centres and networks to share resources and curriculum. They noted that these tools can help them to further adapt their course materials and they are exploring how to extend their remote learning support on Moodle.

### **Presentation - Bev Fontaine, Director of Education, Opaskwayak Cree Nation**

Bev Fontaine explains that Opaskwayak which has 2 schools, one for students in nursery to grade 6 and a Junior and High School, has adopted a blended approach due to physical distancing requirements. Health takes the lead when dealing with COVID-19 in the community and they initially developed 3 plans: one for full return to the classroom; a blended approach; and an online approach. They opted for the blended approach to limit the number of students in the schools. Teachers develop daily learning packages to supplement in class learning and plans also call for the schools to go online if the pandemic spreads. Leadership does not want to shut down too prematurely because of the effect that the lack of routine is having on the students. They have created new staff positions, including health support workers who ride the buses. They take students' temperatures, make sure they respect social distancing and wear masks. There are separate entrances for students who arrive on the bus and those who are brought to

school by their parents. Students who are brought by their parents have their temperature checked before coming into the classroom.

Extra security personnel have also been hired to make sure that staff and students wear their masks and follow safely protocols. Each group comes for a half day. One group in the morning and one group in the afternoon. In between the morning and afternoon sessions, custodial staff sanitize the school with fog machines. It has been a challenge to find qualified bus drivers to drive the additional routes needed for the blended plan. They will also be launching a remote study centre in parish halls and youth centres to be staffed with education support staff and computers. The goal is to provide students with a safe place to go when they are not in school. The study centres are also staffed in the evening for post-secondary students. The daycare hours have been extended into the evening so students can drop off their children and go to the remote student centres.

Being innovative, they provided new solutions which included two outside classrooms. Google classroom training has been provided to all Junior and High school teachers and Chromebooks have been issued to the students in case they need to transition to remote learning. The school has purchased over 500 Chromebooks for students. They have also developed a technical service policy which parents must sign. Assigned staff monitor the use of the devices since Google classroom allows you to monitor when students log in so they can have interventions if they see that students are not logging in. Despite the many steps taken to ensure the safety of students, many parents are reluctant to send their children to school. About 28% of parents have opted to have their children engage in peer remote learning.

### **Presentation - Greg Halcrow, Director of Education, Pimicikamak Cree Nation**

Greg Halcrow, Director of Education for the Pimicikamak Cree Nation presents an overview of the approach and guiding principles adopted by the Pimicikamak Cree Nation when developing its plan to return to school. The team thought hard about the issues of safety and recognized that keeping schools closed had an enormous community costs because students cannot learn, grow, or socialize.

*"I realized that keeping schools closed comes at a massive cost, long term community costs, because children couldn't learn. They couldn't grow. They couldn't engage. They couldn't socialize because of the school being closed. So, we had to find a way to open our schools again."*

With the help of the community, parents and teachers they developed a plan and were able to open schools in the fall. They knew they had to put safety first but that there was also no such thing as zero risk and they adopted the following guiding principles.

- 1) Healthy Classroom – What does it look like? Where children must wear masks, wash their hands frequently and maximize social distancing. Children will be in smaller classroom with groups of 10 to 12 students, creating classroom of cohorts.
- 2) Healthy Buildings – Increase the outdoor ventilation coming in. In the summer and fall, it is simply a question of opening the windows. In preparation for winter, the ventilation system was cleaned out. They have hired additional cleaning staff to clean the school throughout the day. They have also hired extra security to keep the school safe.
- 3) Water Impact - The issue of drinking water was addressed by the purchase of a new filtering system.
- 4) Bathroom Hygiene - When the children go to the washroom, they wash their hands and return to the classroom. People are engaged to monitor this.
- 5) Healthy Activities – It is better to get the children outside since it is healthier. Children are provided with recess and other outside activities.
- 6) Healthy Schedules – They have created staggered transition times for student drop-off at schools and student pick-up from schools. Transportation schedules have been modified to ensure proper social distancing.
- 7) Policies – In the future, policies need to be different to reflect the circumstances of the COVID-19 environment. This impacts sick days. If people leave the community for a non-COVID-related medical treatment for example, they must self-isolate for 5 days and then monitor themselves for symptoms for 9 days. There are discussions about increasing the self-isolation to 14 days. Consideration for hot spots to self-isolate must be undertaken.

The task of re-opening schools and keeping it safe has truly been a community effort.

## APPENDIX A - Agenda

1. Opening Prayer
2. Welcome and Introduction to the Gathering Place: Goals, Objectives, and Activities - Dr. Paulette Tremblay
3. Opening Remarks - Davin Dumas, Guest Host
4. Explanation of how the Townhall will proceed - Simon Brascoupe, Facilitator
5. Presentation by Bev Fontaine, Director of Education, Opaskwayak Cree Nation
6. Open-ended Discussion - Facilitated by Simon Brascoupe
  - 1) Now that you have returned to school and the classroom, how have your needs and priorities changed?
  - 2) Now that you have returned to school and the classroom, what are the key health and safety challenges that have emerged?
  - 3) Now that you have returned to school and the classroom, how have school operations been impacted?
  - 4) Now that you have returned to school and the classroom, are there additional initiatives that you need to take to address learning gaps?
  - 5) Now that you have returned to school and the classroom, what steps are you taking to address the anxiety and mental wellness of students, staff and parents?
  - 6) Now that you have returned to school and the classroom, what is the role of online learning? Do you have sufficient connectivity and devices to meet your needs?
  - 7) Now that you have returned to school and the classroom, what has worked well for you?
  - 8) Do you have any stories, practices or lessons learned that you would like to share with other First Nation Administrators?
7. Presentation by Greg Halcrow, Director of Education, Pimicikamak Cree Nation
8. Summary of Discussion - Manon Lamontagne
9. Next Steps - Dr. Paulette Tremblay
10. Closing Prayer