



Gathering Place

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

New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island

Gathering Place Townhall

held

Thursday, September 3, 2020

2:00 to 4:00 p.m. ADT

Findings Report

Background

As part of its "Gathering Place" 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" Initiative is to provide a place for First Nations Education Administrators 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 virtual town hall was held on Thursday, September 3, 2020 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. ADT. First Nations Education administrators from New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island were invited to participate and seven administrators participated virtually in the town hall using the Zoom platform. The town hall also featured a question and answer session with Craig Caldwell, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Services, Government of New Brunswick and Dr. Kimberly Barker, Medical Officer of Health, Government of New Brunswick. A copy of the agenda is attached in the Appendix.

Question 1. Main Needs and Priorities

Administrators explain that the first priority is safety for students, teachers and staff and the seamless continuation of their academic learning. Under New Brunswick guidelines, if a child shows symptoms, they are to be sent home and call 8-1-1. Even with a negative test, children may be required to stay home for a full quarantine period. One school has brought on an additional health nurse to inform staff and parents and it is recommended that funding be made available for schools to bring on this resource. There is also concern for those communities where parents may have to drive 30 to 40 minutes just to get a test.

One administrator mentions that they have planned for emergency packages so that students can bring their schoolwork home if ever they need to quarantine.

School is scheduled to start on September 8, 2020 and many schools are still finalizing their operational plans. Many of these plans call for students to bring their own devices to school. Many families do not have the means to purchase them and schools have applied for funding to purchase Chromebooks and subsidize internet access.

One region is grouping students in classes of 15 students maximum. The start times and lunch times have been staggered. In other schools, students are brought in on selected days. Children will be engaged in online learning on off days. The priority will be to train students on the platforms being used.

There is great concern about the parents and the community. There is great anxiety among the parents and communication with them is needed to alleviate their anxiety. In March, many communities were not prepared for online learning but the goal this fall is to prepare students and families for online learning in the event of schools shutting down again.

One school is planning to have a Zoom call or Facebook Live call with parents to reassure them that everything is being done to keep students, parents and staff safe.

Question 2. Health and Safety

Most schools are following provincial health guidelines which require students or teachers who show symptoms to self-isolate although there are many questions about those who have chronic allergies or coughs that are not COVID related. Parents will be required to do pre-screening at home. If a child has symptoms, the child is to stay home and call 8-1-1 and follow Public Health directives about getting their child tested. Parents will be advised to keep their children home until all symptoms are gone.

Schools have been told they must follow provincial standards but have not been given the resources. For example, provincial schools have been provided with disinfectant kits, but First Nations schools have only been given the name of the suppliers and will need to pay for supplies.

Plans call for students to wear masks on the bus and masks will be made available. Buses will be disinfected twice daily. One school has designated one bus for elementary school students, one for middle school and one for high school. One school will have monitors on the buses to help bus drivers to ensure that students wear their masks and respect social distancing rules. They will also provide temperature checks, masks and hand sanitizer. It is pointed out that sanitizing and disinfecting are two different things. Buses will be sanitized after each run and then sanitized in the morning and at the end of the day. For some schools, the sanitizing and disinfecting of buses will be done by monitors while for others it will be done by bus drivers. One school is looking to purchase sanitizing sprayers and have reached out to the province to obtain the equipment.

For one school, if a child has a temperature or shows symptoms, they will be placed in a designated seat in the front of the bus and be taken to the school where their parents will be immediately called to come pick up their child. This will be done for the younger children. In the case of high school students, they will be told to go home. There is also the question of whether bus drivers need to be shielded from students with a curtain or plexiglas. One school has also set aside a room to quarantine those students who may show symptoms during the day while they wait for their parents to come and take them home.

Another major area of concern is what to do with students who have medical conditions or special needs. There is a desire not to exempt these students from attending school but there is little support or guidance provided for how to address the issue. One school has made arrangements to have the community medical transport van drive students to and from school.

Question 3. School Operations

The policy of having teachers and students who show symptoms will have an impact on school operations. Many administrators are concerned with the stigmatization if teachers and students are absent for such things as the common cold. During the question and answer session with Dr. Barker, there is discussion of having asymptomatic teachers participate in testing. It is a way to normalize testing and alleviate some of the fears and anxiety surrounding the need to self-isolate. Craig Caldwell confirms that if teachers or students display symptoms, they will need to self-isolate, however, if there are teachers with chronic allergies or a chronic cough, they may get a note from their primary care physician if they have only one symptom which is part of their chronic illness.

Some administrators fear that these guidelines will have a big impact on their personnel. When four or five teachers are out with a cold or flu, there will be a major challenge in finding substitute teachers especially if one looks at the implications of bringing in teachers from outside the bubble. Many administrators are fearful of bringing in new substitute teachers who may have been exposed at other provincial schools. There is also concern that if teachers are sent home with symptoms, parents may pull their children from the school due to their anxiety about COVID.

When those things do happen in our schools, then the parents get anxious about that, especially with social media. If it goes out that a teacher was sent home because they were sick, all of a sudden, we have a bunch of parents pulling kids out for safety reasons."

There is also the issue of adapting personnel policies. Staff may be forced to burn through their sick days and administrators will have to grapple with the implications that this can also have on their budgets.

One of the major issues when dealing with school operations is busing since many communities have their students go to local provincial schools which are under union guidelines. In addition to not having enough buses because of social distancing needs, education administrators have had to plan for more runs on a daily basis. Part of the problem is to get local provincial schools to be accommodating and allowing the buses to drop students off 5 minutes earlier than normal. In some cases, students will be late for the start of the school day: keep in mind that students are held accountable for being on time. So far, these schools have refused the request and this means that the busing schedule will have to be reworked. Administrators are still working to find a solution to the problem. In other cases, communities have purchased additional school buses to allow for social distancing and the addition of bus routes.

One issue of concern is also the lack of planning and resources for language and cultural programs. There are adult programs which schools offer but they have been left out of planning and there are no funds or resources for them.

Question 4. Mental Health

It is difficult to truly assess the impact of COVID-19 on children and the population but there is a great deal of fear and anxiety. Administrators are also concerned about the anxiety that children may feel if they are being stigmatized for being absent from school or if they are showing up late because of the problems with the busing schedules. They are also concerned that there is a general fear about getting tested for COVID-19 both with the discomfort with the actual test and with the reaction of the community if word gets out that someone has been tested. There is a need to normalize COVID testing as a normal preventive measure. There is discussion of having staff and teachers who are asymptomatic being tested as a way of normalizing COVID testing.

There is a great deal of anxiety and fear among parents and that worries administrators. The burden is especially difficult for single parents who have taken on the extra burden of supervising their children's schooling. *"Parents are shutting down because they are overwhelmed."* Many school programs and activities that otherwise would have provided support for parents have shut down due to COVID. Similarly, land-based programming had to be cancelled due to poor attendance because of the fears over COVID.

Question 5. Impact of COVID-19 on Students and Children

One administrator noted that since the start of the pandemic, the number of children in care has more than tripled. Evidence of the impact can be seen in the broken windows in the school and buildings in the community from students being bored. Others are also concerned about the gap in learning. In some cases, children have gone without any academic support, structure or schedule for over six months. In the words of one administrator, *“it has been the longest March Break ever.”* Some administrators have been stressing the need to get children back on normal sleep patterns. *“We’re going to have tired children.”*

As for the impact of COVID-19 on youth and children, some administrators feel that it is difficult to understand the real impact of the pandemic on children. They are perhaps more resilient and stronger than we think. It will be up to administrators and teachers to closely monitor changes in behaviour.

“It’s really going to be up to us and we’re building the airplane in the air. We’re trying to figure it out as we go along. And this is going to evolve. You know, each nation is going to have to determine what supports are going to be offered moving forward to support not just the operational side, not just the instructional side, but the mental health of the community.”

One administrator talked about how they shifted their 5-week career programs to cultural programs that offered different workshops on beadmaking, drum making, etc. Many students were grateful to have the structure and the outlet but unfortunately there were limited spaces and not all youth could benefit from the program.

Question 6. Online Learning

Connectivity remains a major issue. In many First Nations, fiber optic internet connection is only available for major buildings such as the Health Centre, the school and the First Nation administration office. There is no fiber optic internet connection for residences. This leaves many families with poor connectivity. This is because agreements with Indigenous Services Canada do not include residential WIFI connections. One community is looking at owning its own WIFI infrastructure and offering it to its members on a cooperative basis.

Others point out that often families are struggling and do not have the means to pay for internet and to purchase computers and devices needed for online learning. Many administrators indicate that their priority is to prepare students, families and the school for online learning in the event of a second shut down in the fall. This includes purchasing laptop computers and ordering devices for students. The province of New Brunswick has offered laptops to all High School students and many administrators are concerned that the application process for the subsidies may be somewhat complicated and intimidating for parents since it involves providing tax returns. Many

schools have already made the decision to bulk buy laptops or computers for their High School students and they are looking into the provincial subsidy program to see how they can help families obtain the subsidy. One administrator also pointed out that this is another example of how First Nations were not included in the provincial discussions and planning.

One administrator also spoke about creating hotspots within the community so that students and families without internet connection can upload and download their schoolwork

Question 7. Anticipation of what will work well

Many administrators felt that it was too soon to identify those elements that will go well but they have found that working together and collaboratively with other First Nations education administrators has been very helpful and useful. This is especially true since First Nations have been left out of provincial and federal planning. The planning for re-opening schools amid the COVID-19 pandemic has added to the workload of administrators. Often provincial and federal authorities do not understand that First Nations education administration is being done by one person and finding out about changes in provincial or federal plans at the last minute has forced many to scramble at the last minute and has compounded the stress that administrators are dealing with. They would like to be at the table for future discussions.

Question 8. Stories, Practices and Innovations to Share

Some administrators mention that they have been sharing some templates but many have developed their own plans by reading through documents and identifying the particular needs of their community. Many are happy with the idea of sharing their experiences in the town hall format because it allows them to get a better sense of what is happening at each of the schools.

Other mention the importance of the guidance of Elders and community leaders who help to ground the decision making when it comes to school reopening plans. They help to provide foundational values based on traditional culture and principles.

Question and Answer Session with Craig Caldwell and Dr. Kimberly Barker

Craig Caldwell, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Services, Government of New Brunswick

Dr. Kimberly Barker, Medical Officer of Health, Government of New Brunswick

Both state that they recognize the importance of working closely with First Nations in the region.

Clarification regarding quarantine rules for teachers who have symptoms but are known to have chronic allergies and other similar conditions was raised. Administrators reiterate their concerns that it will have a major impact on school operations if they are forced to quarantine for an extended period of time. Craig Caldwell explains his earlier

point that those with one symptom due to chronic conditions such as allergies can get a doctor's note attesting to the chronic condition. The person will not have to self-isolate. If the teacher, however, has more than one symptom, then they should stay home and get tested and stay home until they test negative.

Dr. Barker recognized that there are a number of individuals who have asthma and therefore a chronic cough or allergies and therefore a runny nose. Public health is encouraging these people to get a note from their primary care provider in advance to say that this individual has these allergies or this chronic cough. Only if the cough gets worse or if they have additional symptoms, then it could be more than allergies or asthma. At this point, Public Health would like these people to get tested and stay at home until tests results are received. Depending on where they are in the province, it can take anywhere from twenty-four to forty-eight hours to get the results.

One administrator wanted further clarification for testing and wanted to know if there is testing for asymptomatic people or rapid testing, particularly for teachers. Dr. Barker explained that there are rapid tests available through regional medical officers who can order rapid tests, but they are extremely hard to come by. Medical officers will usually hold on to them and use them only for high risk situations.

She does mention that the province is setting up a 1-800 number for teachers and healthcare workers to allow them to book an appointment to get tested. This includes those that do not have any symptoms.

Dr. Barker also explains that there are generally two types of tests: the nasal swab which can be uncomfortable and 2) the throat swab, which is more comfortable, but it cannot be used for a rapid test. Dr. Barker talked about the importance of collaboration between Public Health and First Nations because of the concerns about overcrowding in First Nations.

The issue of N95 masks was also raised. Dr. Barker reassured administrators that cloth masks or surgical masks are sufficient for teachers and students and that the N95 masks should be reserved for medical personnel.

In order to improve information sharing and collaboration, Dr. Barker is committed to providing the telephone numbers for the 4 regional medical officers and the communicable diseases department which is often staffed by health nurses. Craig Caldwell also explained that the province's Department of Policy and Planning is setting up a database for provincial education administrators and physicians and thinks that First Nations Education administrators may be able to access to this database. He will forward the email address for the Policy and Planning department to Tracey O'Reilly. He reiterated that the province is committed to collaboration and helping First Nations educators.

APPENDIX A

Agenda

1. Opening Prayer
2. Welcome and Introduction to the Gathering Place: Goals, Objectives, and Activities
Dr. Paulette Tremblay
3. Explanation of how the Townhall will proceed
Simon Brascoupe, Facilitator
4. Open-ended Discussion
Facilitated by Simon Brascoupe
 - 1) What are the main needs and priorities of your community as you prepare to return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic?
 - 2) As your community prepares to return to school and the classroom, what key health and safety challenges are faced?
 - 3) As your community prepares to return to school and the classroom, what are the key challenges regarding school operations?
 - 4) As your community prepares to return to school and the classroom, what key challenges has your community faced when it comes to mental health?
 - 5) What impact has COVID-19 had on children and youth since March 2020?
 - 6) As your community prepares to return to school, what is needed to support online learning?
 - 7) As your community prepares to return to school and the classroom during COVID-19, what has worked well and what do you anticipate will work well?
 - 8) Do you have any stories, practices, tools, templates, innovations, that your school or community would like to share with other First Nation Administrators?
5. Summary of Discussion
Manon Lamontagne
6. Next Steps
Dr. Paulette Tremblay

7. Question and Answer Session

Craig Caldwell, Assistant Deputy Minister, Education Services, Government of New Brunswick and Dr. Kimberly Barker, Medical Officer of Health, Government of New Brunswick

8. Closing Prayer