



Gathering Place

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

Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador

Gathering Place Townhall Findings

held

Wednesday, September 2, 2020

1:00 to 2:30 p.m. ADT

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 Wednesday, September 2, 2020 from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. ADT. First Nations Education administrators from Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Labrador were invited to participate. Seventeen administrators participated in the town hall. Many of them met face-to-face at a meeting in Halifax, Nova Scotia while others participated virtually using the Zoom platform.

The opening prayer was given by Blair Gould and the session was facilitated by Darren Googoo, Director of Education for Membertou First Nation. The closing prayer was made by Mary-Ellen Googoo. The summary of findings follow below. A copy of the agenda is also attached in the Appendix.

Question 1. Main Needs and Priorities

Darren mentions that safety is the main priority. School planning has been focussed on 3 main areas: literacy, Mi'kmaw language and numeracy. The planning has also focussed on mental health particularly the stress on parents and the mental health impact on children. The safety and mental health of students and parents are paramount.

"We've been talking a lot about, academics, of course, but also we're getting a lot of stress coming from parents. And a lot of parents have a lot of unknowns. We can't even begin to answer the questions that they're bringing to us. So, I'm really hoping that the stress of the parents is not passing on to their kids. So, when they start next Tuesday, we'll have kids that are stressed out. Life is stressful as it is already. So, I guess mental health will be our issue."

There is a need to increase communication to better build relationships.

Question 2. Health and Safety

"...as I have more conversation with my staff... a lot of them are getting really stressed out about having to create a social, safe learning environment for their students."

There are several children who have health conditions and the focus has been on how to clean and sanitize spaces for children. One school has purchased a sanitizer spray gun for use in the classroom.

The plan for some schools is to have elementary school children come in for half days. One group in the morning and one group in the afternoon. There is no lunch program since this could pose a problem for social distancing and cleaning. High school students will go home at lunch.

There is also concern for the learning gap with students having been out of school for so long. Some schools are looking for funds to provide additional support for students.

There are also classroom teachers off-reserve whose children are in the provincial system and they are really stressed out.

Schools have planned to take all necessary precautions. Students will be asked to wear masks on the bus and in the halls until they are in the classroom. The goal is to create bubbles for each grade. There will be staggered starts for each grade as well as staggered lunch hours per grade. There will be no breakfasts although snacks will be provided to students once they are in the classroom in their bubble. Buses will be running twice in the morning, twice at lunch and twice after school in order to respect social distancing rules. Signage and postage will also be used in the school to make sure that students respect social distancing rules. Wash stations are being

established where fountains are presently located by removing them and replacing them. In other instances, fountains are being shut off and students will be barred from using them.

Question 3. School Operations

There are several challenges when it comes to school operations. There are over 1000 students over four buildings. Social distancing remains a challenge. Students will attend classes for 2 days and study at home for 3 days. There will be 2 groups alternating. The challenge is to find an adequate number of substitute teachers. The school is asking their substitute teachers for a firm commitment not to work in other school districts so as to keep a bubble.

There are also cleaning challenges, the need to have administrative staff trained to cover each other's positions in case of absences.

A major challenge is providing for the needs of students with special needs in an inclusive environment. In some instances, they have outside workers with them. There is the question of whether such workers are deemed to be essential. Can they be allowed in the classroom? The other question is about outside clinical psychologists, speech therapists and other specialists who come from outside the reserve. Are they allowed to come into the school? Parents want to know who is allowed into the school.

Dealing with various parties before communicating the plan with parents is also important. The administrators must consult with the union, with Chief and Council and other agencies before communicating with the parents. This can cause some delay at times and increase the anxiety on the part of the parents.

There are also serious challenges for cleaning staff. Additional training is required, and it is important to have processes and systems in place. One school has hired and trained additional staff in anticipation of absences from the staff.

"We've cut the classes in half so one group will go in on one day, and the other group goes in on the next day. We're faced with a lot of challenges when it comes to substitute teachers and making sure that all of our staff are able to cover off for one another. We were already facing a sub challenge before this back filling positions. Now we're looking in-house and we're asking the few subs that we have to sub in our community. We can pretty much guarantee the small group that we have daily."

Coordinating bussing schedules and coordinating cleaning and disinfecting buses before and after each run also requires a great deal of planning and coordination. Schools are planning to make multiple runs using staggered start times to accommodate students. The runs are longer because the busses need to be clean and sanitized after each run.

Another issue is to minimize the movement of students, especially in the higher grades. For example, language teachers will be asked to move to each class rather than have students move to the classroom as was done before the pandemic.

In one school, gym classes will be socially distanced activities and each child will be given their own unique water bottle and told not to share. One school is also looking at the costs involved in putting plexiglass shields for each desk.

Another major issue for school operations is maintaining enough support staff such as janitors. Cleaning procedures are more extensive, and some schools have had to hire and training additional staff. *“So day janitors are going to be a major issue for us to keep our level of security at school.”*

Question 4. Mental Health

“I think creating an inclusive environment is going to be one of the biggest challenges we have this year with the pandemic, certainly within the school environment, our students are only coming for two and a half hours a day at the lower levels. So, they're not going to be getting that full five hours of support a day for students, some students that that might need it. We just don't have the manpower and we can't provide the social space that is needed in the school. We don't have enough physical space.”

As mentioned previously, mental health is a major concern. Not only students' anxiety about returning to school and the classroom but also the parents' anxiety about the safety of their children in the environment. One school has used the local radio and held Q & A sessions with parents not only to get their input but also to alleviate their anxiety.

Desks are two metres apart in the classroom. Schools have removed all non-essential furniture and teachers have the freedom to set up their own classrooms. One administrator also stressed that it was important to insist that all non-essential furniture be removed from the classroom since every inch of space is needed.

Anxiety among the staff as well has tended to increase as well. One administrator is giving a trauma-informed workshop for staff and making each of them medicine bags. This is based on the Safer Schools training on a Trauma-Informed Return to School.

For one community, it was indicated that there was a plan to do a live talk on the radio to ask parents what they thought of school opening. It would be a way for parents to communicate with each other and share their ideas on what they think is best for their children.

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

There is a major concern about the learning gap among students since they have not been in school since March. Administrators also expressed concern about what the lack of a school routine will have on the students particularly older students who have spent a great deal of time without structure and have spent their time on video games. There is concern that they will find transitioning back to a school routine will leave some vulnerable and at risk of dropping out. Administrators also talked about how the lack of a normal sleeping routine and other routine disruptions will have on their learning and behavioural issues.

One administrator has indicated that they are requiring teachers to plan to teach executive functioning skills since parents are not always equipped to teach these skills. For example, teachers will not only teach the students about social distancing and how to walk on the right following signage in the schools, how to wear their masks safely, they should also talk to children about having a healthy sleeping schedule.

There is a definite impact on special needs children in First Nations communities. Many special needs workers come from outside the school district and they may work in the homes of the children as well as in schools. It is important to allow workers and/or parents in the communities and schools to be with special needs students. There should be prepared spaces for them.

Question 6. Online Learning

“We are currently going to be having students in school, but we are aware that there was a very strong possibility that some of our schools are going to need to go to online learning a lot quicker and to be prepared for it very quickly. So, while we're not opening with an online learning environment initially from day one, we are preparing for it right now. And some schools are already opening in a virtual environment part time in some ways.”

Some schools are preparing for eventual shut down of the schools and online learning will once again become a major component. Several schools are planning to provide devices to all students. The province of Nova Scotia has made a commitment to provide devices to Black and Indigenous students as a priority. One school has equipped its students with Google Chrome and will be using Google Classroom in the school. The goal is to teach the students how to use the devices and platform while in the classroom so that if there is an eventual shut down, they will be able to use the devices.

Another school has gone with Apple iPads. They want one iPad for each student. These devices have been already used in the classroom for the past three years. When students return to school, emphasis will be placed on relearning how to use the devices. Planning for the curriculum includes digital use and plans include informing parents and guardians about the digital online component and its impact on the evaluation system.

Another school is bringing its teachers back first with the idea of training them on the online platform use. All teachers will be trained on how to use the platform and design their lesson plans for the platform. All households should have at least one computer and efforts will be made to provide households with several children with more than one device.

Concerns were also raised about spotty Internet connection. Several schools are trying to setup WIFI hubs outside the school and in other public areas so that parents can drive their children to the parking lot and they can either upload or download their homework.

The plans generally call for a blended model whereby students will be given their materials in the classroom. Emphasis in the early days will be on training students and parents on how to access materials online. The students will download their homework assignments at school, take them home and complete the assignments and upload them upon their return to school. In future, if the school is shut down, students will be able to download their work via the public WIFI hubs. This is essential since if the school shuts down again, many teachers who live outside the community will not be able to enter if barricades go up again. The school will have to go to a full online teaching model.

Other communities are also setting up community WIFI hubs in their Adult Education centre where families can book 45-minute slots to upload or download their work. Teachers and teaching assistants will be made available to parents and students to help them with the technology if needed.

Question 7. Anticipation of What Will Work Well

One of the things that administrators anticipate will work well will be a transition to online learning because many have had the experience from the past year and have the infrastructure in place and have done it before. So, they anticipate that to be a little bit easier the second time around.

Another anticipates that staggering days and class sizes with no more than 12 students per classroom will work well. Smaller groups will help to get children used to socializing with their peers under a new normal which will include social distancing, hand washing, etc. These smaller groups should make for stronger bonds in smaller groups.

“We're even doing social distancing at recess and stuff, so they'll only be going out with their classroom bubble. So, socializing and forming a tight group with the other students in their bubble, and we think that's going to work because everybody is pretty keen on developing those bonds in those small groups.”

Also, many schools will collapse their learning to only core courses in order to limit student mobility throughout the school.

Question 8. Stories, Practices and Innovations to Share

The administrators agreed to try upload their COVID plans or COVID school opening plans to the Mi'kmaw Kina'mathewey central office and have them put online so they can be shared amongst themselves, but also with our other big Mi'kmaw communities in New Brunswick and Newfoundland.

One tip was shared with administrators. One key challenge was to find a way to maintain proper social distancing of 2 metres between the desks. Janitors had to move the desks for cleaning so it could be quite a challenge to reset all the desks back in the right spots. One trick that was used was to use a red dot under the right corner of each desk so that after the janitors moved the desks to clean, they could easily put the desks back and be assured that they were the mandatory 2 metres apart from each other.

APPENDIX A

Agenda

1. Opening Prayer
2. Welcome and Introduction to the Gathering Place: Goals, Objectives, and Activities
Dr. Paulette Tremblay
3. Opening Remarks
Darren Googoo, Guest Host
4. Open-ended Discussion
Facilitated by Darren Googoo
 - 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. Next Steps

Dr. Paulette Tremblay

6. Closing Prayer