



Gathering Place

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



Saskatchewan

Gathering Place Townhall

held
Wednesday, September 2, 2020
3:00 to 5:00 p.m. CST

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 Wednesday, September 2, 2020 from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. CST. The guest host for this event was Simon Bird, Director of Education for the Lac La Ronge First Nation. First Nations Education administrators from Saskatchewan were invited to participate and twenty-one administrators participated virtually in the town hall using the Zoom platform. The town hall also featured two presentations on best practices. The first was by Heather Merasty of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council and the second was by Maureen Johns, of the

Pasqua First Nation. Please see the Agenda in the Appendix. Elder Roger Ratt gave the opening prayer.

Question 1. Main Needs and Priorities

The discussion begins with a focus on the availability of technologies and personal protective equipment. Due to the pandemic, teachers must shift how they think about teaching. The concept of “double teaching” is discussed. Previously, teachers were taught that curriculum is king, and the focus was on developing the curriculum. With the pandemic, teachers must now start to think about outcomes and indicators rather than following the curriculum. Because of this shift, some schools have tried to put teachers in the Google classroom to get them together to share their ideas and their experiences.

Information overload in the spring and summer was also a daunting challenge for First Nations Education Administrators who were inundated with best practices. Just to work through the volume of information coming at them was a challenge but it was necessary to reassure parents that everything was being done to ensure the safety and success of students.

Another mentioned that the priority for them was to decolonize the thinking of parents and guardians and stress to them that they are the most important teachers for their children. It is important to build a healthy relationship with the school. One positive outcome of the pandemic was that it has allowed them to improve relationships with parents and guardians, many of whom were residential school survivors.

“It's very important to us that we uplift our parents and guardians to understand that now is the time for them to resume their close relationships with their children and schooling. We have many parents and grandparents who are residential school survivors. And so, the whole concept of being involved in your children's education in a meaningful way is something that we've struggled with for a long time... During this phase of the pandemic, better and stronger partnerships with our parents and the school is something we're really happy to see.”

Another mentioned that the goal is to bring comfort to parents and guardians as well as teachers. Why are we in this situation in the first place? It is the result of continued exploitation. How can we bring teaching to our children if we continue to exploit the land which throws the land and earth out of balance?

“Bringing that type of philosophy back to our kids, to our people, that the earth itself can only sustain us for so long, and when we throw it out of balance, this kind of stuff happens.”

Question 2. Health and Safety

The discussion began with the issue of ventilation. One school had their physical structures and HVAC system inspected. This requires technical know-how and there are high budget costs associated with improving structure to match the code, but a lack of engineering knowledge makes it difficult to make an informed decision.

I've learned more about HEPA filters and UV lights and air flow in the last two weeks than ever in my whole life including some of those structural big-ticket items like how to create self-flushable toilets, things that don't require touching and all of that.

One school system has two EHO (Environmental Health Officers) who will make recommendations and will physically do a walk through in the schools. The schools are making their own signage to save costs.

Another major health issue is transportation particularly when it comes to social distancing and proper cleaning. They not only have to increase the number of buses but also the routes. How do you calculate how many masks you need? The Health department will help with that as well as with training (hand washing, mask wearing, etc.) NITHA (Northern Inter-Tribal Health Authority) has developed a custodial online training program.

Another issue surrounding health and safety was the question of liability. With so many different plans being used, there are potential issues if students should happen to catch the virus at school. Nations need to get informed and consider the issues surrounding liability.

"...[R]ight now we have the potential for a nation to be held liable because if they haven't done enough or if teachers and students haven't followed the guidelines set out. There are different standards that have been set by everybody. Some are going to school half time; some are going to school full time and all this kind of thing...I don't know if it's a perceived liability. I think there is liability for sure."

It was also mentioned that many of the plans and decision-making around education has been driven by health departments. For example, although everyone knew that personal protective equipment (PPE) would be needed, many had to wait for the Chief Medical Officer to decide before getting PPEs.

"I think right from the get-go, there should have been a little bit more of an equal footing as opposed to education coming in after the fact to justify something that we've noticed."

Because of the physical challenges with buildings, some schools have delayed their opening until November. The plan is to create 2 bubbles, one for elementary school and one for high school. Within these 2 major bubbles will be smaller classroom bubbles. The added time will be used for planning. Students will be distance learning or virtual learning while the teachers will be in the classrooms. Lessons will be staggered. Planning is being done in close collaboration with the Health Centre and good communications is key. Of course, leadership always has the last say and approval of any plan.

“At the end of the day, it's our leadership that decide what's best for the community. I did the first community engagement. I talked with our staff. I talked with our youth. They talked to our elders. Then it was up to leadership.”

Question 3. School Operations

When it came to developing a Return to school plan, most administrators looked at three options for learning:

- 1) In-Person (face-to-face)
- 2) Blended (face-to-face and virtual)
- 3) Virtual (full online learning)

Each community in consultation with the various First Nations health committees and counsel, and leadership have worked together to build a plan that custom fits their community and their needs.

In addition to the plans for three models discussed, the issue of home schooling for students who don't have the Internet was mentioned. There are a growing number of parents who are requesting 100% online learning or home schooling. There is a lack of clarity about what is involved in home schooling. Local urban centres in the province are providing online home schooling but what parents do not realize that it is all self-directed and there is no support for students or parents. All they get is a password. Administrators are worried that some parents will choose this option and that there will be no support for these students.

Another major challenge doesn't just involve school operations, but also includes all other services that the First Nation offers. Part of a successful planning process was to get all the managers of all the different departments (Public Works, Health, Child and Family Services and Youth Law) together from the First Nation. It is important to have input from all of these people in the early days and plan for a single response from the First Nation rather than have a separate school response.

"I think the challenge was successfully met that our school operations and the well-being of the children and students that go there is now a shared responsibility beyond just the Education Department."

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. Although some schools have wellness workers and a therapist from the outside, those communities which imposed barricades often had no one on site. So it fell to the Education staff. Mental health workers are in high demand and many administrators worry about the impact of COVID-19 on the little ones and the trauma they may have suffered. They also worry about the anxiety experienced by youth, staff and the community. There is also concern on the potential for burnout among staff who have worked non-stop all summer. With the threat of COVID-19, many teachers are leaving the profession because they fear that they may bring it home to their families.

In some cases, administrators have been able to hire additional social workers but are facing the problem of housing shortages in addition to security barriers and check points. These support workers may not be allowed into the communities if they are not deemed essential.

One administrator points out that the schools' ability to weather the storm is being tested across the entire school system. Some communities like Pasqua First Nation have done well and have made national news because of their preparedness. A lot of communities are in survival mode and some families have gone out.

On one day, you're telling the kids, don't come. It's a dangerous place. And now we're telling them to come back. I think it's frustrating for some of our kids.

There is no guarantee that kids will come back to school. The key is to continue to build the relationship with the families.

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

Collaboration and cooperation can help to address some of the issues, but plans must be realistic. You just can't go back to the way it was.

One school district brought 10 communities together as part of its outreach to provide support for each other and to bring everyone closer. It reinforced the sense of collective action as people listened to each other and built a sense that people need to get through this as a community.

One administrator also noted that often when we talk about mental health there is a tendency to look at the negative but it is important to look at the positive aspects such as the resiliency shown by people and the strengthening of relationships as people look out for each other more.

I believe that resiliency is growing. We are rolling with the punches, reaching out to friends and family. When you have to decide which 10 people are going to be in your bubble, you tend to do some evaluation of the people that you are allowing into your bubble...So when I think of mental health, I think of the wellness aspect of it for sure. We have depression for sure. We have stress and anxiety. But we also have that growing sense that we are in it together.

Question 6. Online Learning

The biggest issue for online learning is the poor connectivity especially in northern communities. Non-First Nations communities are the priority for cellphone towers while northern First Nations must pay to have the towers put up. So First Nations schools and communities are forced to come up with their own solutions. While some have tried to work with Sask-Tel during the pandemic, they have now been informed that any kind of major cell phone developments will have to wait until after the provincial election.

On the question of what platforms to use, one administrator explained that rather than the Zoom platform they opted to use Google Classroom for teaching and WebEx for online meetings. All their staff are trained in Google Classroom and they, in turn, provide training for the schools. As for WebEx, they find that it is cost efficient since they always had the licences for it and prefer it to Zoom. They also record their presentations and place them online so that people can download the presentations and training if they have problems streaming the live video feed.

Question 7. Anticipation of what will work well

Although it is still early in the process of returning to school, some administrators believe that the options developed will work because they were part of a collaborative process and this process generally has led to past successes. Sharing ideas and tweaking ideas from others is a good thing.

Question 8. Stories, practices, and innovations to share

Administrators feel that as the process continues, there will be many stories to tell and share. Part of the benefit of these town halls is that it can help people share their best practices and ideas and borrowing and sharing ideas will help administrators get through the pandemic. Several are willing to share their plans with each other.

Presentation by Heather Merasty, Meadow Lake Tribal Council

Heather Merasty is the Senior Director of Education at the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC). She talked about the history and goals of the Meadow Lake Tribal Council. Since 1981, it has grown from 10 employees with a budget of \$150,000 to over 300 employees and a budget of \$55 million in 2017. It is located in the northwest part of the province and includes Cree and Dene linguistic groups under Treaties 6, 8 and 10. So there's a number of things that the Meadow Lake Tribal Council (MLTC) provides and supports to its First Nations.

The mission of MLTC is to equip First Nations children and youth to be able walk successfully in both worlds. It is a federally incorporated board. Chief and Council from each community appoints a person to be a director on the board which meets quarterly, and which also holds an annual general meeting.

The MLTC supports nine schools which range from 100 to 350 students and which have over 2400 students. All the schools with the exception of one offer educational programming from nursery school to grade 12.

On March 16, 2020, MLTC offices were ordered to shut down and employees were told to work from home. Some schools were trying to provide secondary learning packages and MLTC was continuing to provide support for those schools that requested it. It developed a Return to School Plan that offered three options: in person schooling, virtual online learning and a blended approach. Each community will decide its own approach and its own start date. MLTC will help schools acquire laptops and devices as well as train teachers. Even with the stress and anxiety surrounding the re-opening of schools, Ms. Merasty sees the better collaboration between different First Nations agencies as one of the small blessings that has

emerged from the pandemic. Areas of concern included: connectivity; technology devices; technical learning for teachers; funding; information overload and change; staff, students and parents fear and anxiety; mental health needs; online Professional Development – how do we include Elders; and dealing with the unknown. Blessings included: enhanced communication with the community, staff, students, and parents; prioritizing and focusing on what means the most; collaboration and having more conversations; improved relationships which bring us closer together; and efficiencies with more virtual, online and digital media.

Presentation by Maureen Johns, Pasqua First Nation

Maureen Johns is the Director of Education for the Pasqua First Nation. She shared a story that reflected the philosophy and approach that Pasqua First Nation used to develop its Return to School plan. In her story, she likened the COVID-19 to a tiger, a scary saber-toothed tiger. Children were told to stay inside until someone caught the tiger and put it in a cage. But after 170 days, unable to contain the virus, the need was to develop a plan that would empower the children and community so that they did not live in fear. This was based on an Elder of the Pasqua First Nation telling her: *“we have choices regarding COVID-19 - we can be afraid of it or we can respect it.”*

She presented the framework that Pasqua First Nation developed as part of its return to school plans. The framework is based on a holistic approach - mental, emotional, physical, spiritual. It comes from a place of strength, mental development and respect. Part of the plan is to reassure everyone that safety is a priority. Cloth masks will be provided to all students and they will be colour coded to identify grades and groups. Employment contracts are flexible to support online learning and a blended approach. Physical fitness is also an important component to their plan.

The relationship with the parents is also critical and many parents have not traditionally been involved in the school. The pandemic has allowed the parents to come back and be an important part of their children’s learning. Dedicated staff have been identified to work with parents to coach them on basic things like setting up a study corner, making up a study schedule as well as helping parents who want to help their children with their homework. This new relationship between the school and the parents is very important.

Lastly, the spiritual development in the plan, builds on trust, nurturing, and the importance of respect over fear. There are people from different spiritual traditions in the community, but they all share the same core values of caring about children.

Pasqua First Nation is in the process of finishing its handbook and will share it with other FNEAs in the region.

APPENDIX A

Agenda

1. Opening Prayer
2. Welcome and Introduction to the Gathering Place: Goals, Objectives, and Activities
Dr. Paulette Tremblay
3. Opening Remarks
Simon Bird, Guest Host
4. Explanation of how the Townhall will proceed
Simon Brascoupe, Facilitator
5. Presentation by Meadow Lake Tribal Council
Heather Merasty
6. 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?
7. Presentation by Pasqua First Nation
Maureen Johns, Director of Education

8. Summary of Discussion
Manon Lamontagne
9. Next Steps
Dr. Paulette Tremblay
10. Closing Prayer