



Gathering Place

“The virus should not be feared, it should be respected”
-Elder

Yukon and Northwest Territories Gathering Place Townhall

Wednesday, November 4, 2020
3:30-5:00 MST (5:30-7:00 EDT)

Findings Report

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 Yukon and Northwest Territories virtual town hall was held on Wednesday, November 4, 2020 from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. MST. The guest hosts for the town hall were Melanie Bennett from the Yukon and Jane Arychuk from the Northwest Territories. Twenty-one Education administrators from the Yukon and Northwest Territories participated virtually in the town hall using the Zoom platform. Please see the Agenda in the Appendix. Simon Brascoupé from FNEAA facilitated this session.

It must be noted that there are no First Nations schools in the Yukon or the Northwest Territories, First Nations students attend territorial schools.

Question 1. Main Needs and Priorities

Participants mentioned that plans have been developed and implemented to ensure the health and safety of the students; this includes masks, physical distancing, and additional cleaning. When it comes to cultural activities, Elders are adjusting to the new norms surrounding cleaning and especially when it comes to the cleaning of sacred objects. The most difficult challenge is getting schools to expand the curriculum to include land-based education.

It was indicated that plans need to be created that are appropriate for each school. Many do not want a top-down “one-size-fits all” approach. There are also challenges in getting younger students to respect the bubbles and social distancing protocols. Most schools have reorganized classrooms into pods. Each pod is distinct, and teachers do their own scheduling for when it is time to transition so that students from different pods do not run into each other when it is time for recess, lunch, etc. The students and teachers have responded positively, and the results have been amazing.

The interesting thing is that this is probably the quietest school opening year I've ever had. It's almost like each little classroom or pod has become its own little family. And so there's not really the kind of behavior situations that sometimes we have to help teachers and students with. It's been incredibly quiet and very organized...The kids have been just absolutely amazing. It's been a very positive result after the rejigging, redoing, stepping outside of the box, and trying to find new ways.

The experience has helped teachers to continue to think outside the box but there have been sacrifices, land-based training being one of them. Many participants spoke about how they are looking at ways to promote culture and their commitment to keep First Nations cultures at the forefront.

Question 2. Health and Safety

The participants spoke about concerns regarding the mental anxiety of the children. The pandemic and new health and safety measures have created a number of restrictions that children must get used to. As well some rituals and routines have been prevented from resuming. One example is one school where they do morning drumming with students gathered around the drum, however, with inside crowd limitations, students are not allowed to gather as a large group. They also had programs where older students would mentor younger students, but this had to be suspended since each student must now be

in their own classroom “pod”. Similarly, younger children do not understand why they cannot see their older siblings in their classroom.

We always had drumming in the front lobby of the school. It was a powwow Drum that was made by Elder Grandpa Patty, who passed away last year. We had other elders who came and shared songs and kids would be around the drumming. We are not able to do that right now because of COVID-19. We found that was a nice way to start the day, kind of the heartbeat of the school. That's no longer able to happen now.

Another major concern is the food insecurity that many First Nations students face. When classes were suspended in March some children were in precarious positions and the school continued to reach out and keep in touch with families to provide support or refer them to services that could help them. The participants also spoke about the impact it has had on staff and how they worry about the safety and security of their students. Schools organized food and clothing drives and some teachers would set up in the driveway and read to children from a distance.

Participants indicated that it is important to promote counselling services to staff and students. Everyone one is on edge. For example, with the recent snowstorm that shut down the schools, teachers worried about students being on the buses.

Question 3. School Operations

Participants noted that the absence of teachers and staff also affected school operations. The use of substitutes can be disruptive to the routine and add to the anxiety of the students. The stress amongst teachers is also a concern.

“Our students are stressed because our teachers are stressed. It made me aware that I need to be calm in the moment.”

The fact that students have been divided into their classroom bubbles has also had a negative impact on socializing at school. The postponement or limitations placed on so many activities and programs have hurt the sense of belonging. In some instances, teachers are using traditional and cultural activities to try and help them to cope with their anxiety. For example, one participant spoke about how students were brought to the gymnasium where they could be spaced out and did a smudging in the gym.

Question 4. Learning Gaps

Participants talked about how they have noticed a regression of students despite their best efforts to reach out to parents and students during the shutdown which started in March. Online learning and a blended approach to teaching has forced teachers to look at learning in a whole new light. It has been a steep learning curve for the staff especially to master the new online platforms.

Underlying the new way of teaching is recognizing that the need is not to teach to the curriculum but rather to get students back to their personal best.

Frequent absenteeism on the part of students is also having an impact on their learning. Many parents are so frightened by the COVID-19 pandemic that they are keeping their children at home. In some instances, students attend school on an intermittent basis, and this only exacerbates the problem for students who are falling behind. In other instances, the long absence from school due to the lockdowns, have meant that students' sleeping patterns have been changed. They are up quite late and sleep for most of the day. They may come to school only in the afternoon or only once a week. Teachers are trying to cope with so many variables.

Question 5. Mental Health

With so many challenges, participants have noted that there is an urgent need for mental health support for both teachers and students. Educators are starting their year exhausted rather than excited.

"...to me, it feels like we were at the end of the school year where everybody's ready to lose their minds and I feel like this is going to be a long school year."

One participant noted that there is a gap in our connection to others. One Elder told her that we are all human and we need to be touched. Emotional connection becomes more difficult because of the social distancing and this is only added to the challenges and stress that teachers face.

"The point about touching because we are social beings. And when we lack that, it really impacts the way we learn because of the emotional connection that takes place with learning. So I find our teachers are really trying hard. God bless them, they're trying to find different ways of teaching but they're getting tired and stressed."

Participants also spoke about some of the steps and measures that they are taking to deal with the anxiety and stress. One mentioned that even before the pandemic, they were focusing on trauma in education, looking at best practices. The pandemic has only accelerated the implementation of these practices. They encourage teachers to remain calm and talk softly to students to make them feel safe and secure. They also encourage the use of talking circles among the staff and encourage teachers to have talking circles every morning in their classrooms so that students can express their feelings including what they are happy about. The key message is "don't let the curriculum drive your school." Sharing positive stories with students and staff is also very important and when students share their positive stories, teachers make it a point to share the child's excitement.

Despite these practices, there is a high demand for mental health support. In one school, they have a school counsellor coming one day a week. There are more than a quarter of the students on her list waiting to see a counselor. Thanks to Jordan's principle, a trauma specialist visits the school every two weeks. Here too, the demand is very high.

Other participants spoke of how they have built a wellness camp on the mountain where children can go and spend 2 weeks with their teacher, guides and knowledge holders. It is part of a leadership training program and students are involved in the building of the camp out on the land. The children are excited about going out on the land and this helps with the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs of the children. The program has been aligned with the existing curriculum.

Others also spoke about how they are building tent frames with a smoke shack outside the school where children will be allowed to go and take a break if they are feeling stressed. Unfortunately, the plans which called for the students to help in the building of the tent frames was not permitted by the Department of Education because of safety concerns. It is an opportunity missed for students to acquire new knowledge but to also take ownership of the structures.

Question 6. Online Learning

When it comes to online learning, most mentioned that efforts have been made to equip students with devices and several schools have received grants to do so. There is also a need to acquire specialized equipment for special needs students. Online learning will also play a bigger role if the spread of the pandemic forces school closures. For rural communities, this means that students, especially high school students will have to tap into other regional curriculum offerings. Others also spoke about how online learning has permitted them to be more flexible with students. Rather than a strict 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. school routine, students are given more say in when to do their work. The school is trying to complement this with the building of a camp for students to encourage land-based learning. Most acknowledge that the toughest part of online learning is the lack of human interaction. “Kids love hugs but they are not allowed to do that.”

Questions 7 and 8. What has work well. Stories, practices and innovations

Despite the many challenges and concerns, participants noted that one of the lessons of the pandemic is that people have learned to be more collaborative and supportive. The pandemic has forced them to find creative ways to deal with events such as Thanksgiving or Halloween.

“We have learned to talk, share, and support each other.”

Everyone is dedicated to trying to find great solutions together to ensure that student activities continue. It is important to maintain normalcy for the children despite the limitations and restrictions imposed by COVID-19.

Others have noted that students in rural and remote areas also face greater challenges because of limited connectivity. For example, in one region, there were over 300 students

who do not have connectivity. Schools and teachers are faced with the challenge of finding alternative learning tools, but the curriculum and programs are often too rigid.

“We need to be mindful that we have to put children at the centre, and we need to be more flexible.”

One final message: “Self-care is important because so many people are depending on you – students, parents, and community.”

APPENDIX A - Agenda

1. Opening Prayer
2. Welcome and Introduction to the Gathering Place: Goals, Objectives, and Activities
Dr. Paulette Tremblay
3. Opening Remarks
Melanie Bennett and Jane Arychuk, Guest Hosts
4. Explanation of how the Townhall will proceed
Simon Brascoupe, Facilitator
5. Open-ended Discussion
Facilitated by Simon Brascoupé
 - 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?
6. Summary of Discussion
Manon Lamontagne
7. Closing Remarks
Melanie Bennett and Jane Arychuk, Guest Hosts
8. Next Steps
Dr. Paulette Tremblay
9. Closing Prayer