



SELU

Saskatchewan Educational Leadership Unit

Developing a Northern, Rural and Remote Education Strategy: Beginning the Research Conversation

PROJECT GOAL

To develop a strengths-based Northern/Rural/Remote Strategy for Prek-12 education in Saskatchewan co-designed by educational partners, leadership organizations, and university researchers informed by lived experience and research-informed scholarship.



PARTNERS

SSBA

strategic leadership
and oversight



USask Team

gather and share
information on current
and future needs in
northern/rural/remote
education to inform
strategy development



Educational Partners

participate in
conversations that
frame initial needs and
directions for a
comprehensive
provincial strategy



ABOUT SELU

University-based, Community-aligned

- Usask non-profit research centre aligned with the College of Education and the Department of Educational Administration
- Active partner in the K–12 and post-secondary education sectors for over 40 years.
- Customized consultative and research services
- Connects faculty research expertise with partner-led needs



USASK TEAM

Dr. Paul Newton

- **Role:** Dept Head and Professor of Educational Administration.
- **Expertise:** administrative practices, the principalship, educational improvement, teacher leadership, and theoretical constructions of leadership and administration.

Dr. Dawn Wallin

- **Role:** Associate Vice-President Research and Professor of Educational Administration
- **Expertise:** rural education and governance, educational administration and leadership, equity issues in education, and teacher education.

Dr. Greg McJannet

- **Role:** SELU Associate Director
- **Expertise:** 24 years in the public education sector as a teacher, vice principal, principal and superintendent in northern and rural spaces. He has led numerous research and consulting projects in the education sector.



RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

- Critical Appreciative inquiry: Successes, innovations and creative responses
- Describe the distinct contexts of Rural / Remote and Northern communities in Saskatchewan
- Identify current challenges and opportunities
- Explore unique responses in policy, planning, infrastructure, and educational innovations
- Explore land/place-based, language and cultural programming innovations.
- Provide recommendations to the SSBA to inform future efforts that support the creation of a Northern/Rural/Remote education strategy



PROJECT DELIVERABLES

We are here

1

Literature Review

Identify issues, emergent themes in northern/rural/remote prek-12 education

2

Environmental Scan

Existing examples of northern/ rural/ remote strategies, policies and innovations

3

Partner Conversations

3 northern, 4 rural, SK DLC

distinct needs, promising models, innovations, insights and information needs for strategy development

4

Final Report

June 2026
With Expected future work and engagements.



Progress Report

- Literature Review near completion
- Focused Conversation Instrument Created with SSBA
- Awaiting Usask Ethics Approval
- Synthesis of Literature review and informing next steps.



Brief Review of Literature



Why Rural, Remote, and Northern Education Matters

Dual Role of Education Systems

Rural education provides foundational learning and supports community stability, workforce, and regional development.

Educational Equity and Regional Impact

Educational disparities affect employment, health, and civic participation, influencing rural population trends.

Reconciliation and Indigenous Education

Education in rural and remote areas supports reconciliation by addressing colonial legacies through culturally grounded approaches and language revitalization.

Strategic Investment Importance

Investing in rural education promotes national unity, social stability, and economic resilience for the long term.



Presentation Overview for Policymakers

Clarifying Key Definitions

Defining rural, remote, and northern education is crucial to tailor effective policies and avoid misaligned strategies.

System-Level Challenges

Challenges include recruitment, student outcome disparities, infrastructure gaps, and colonial policy impacts requiring integrated responses.

Strengths and Assets

Rural education benefits from strong communities, small schools, Indigenous language revival and cultural, and digital innovations.

Evidence-Informed Policies

Effective strategies include teacher pipelines, mentorship, ICT investments, and sustainable education frameworks.



Key Definitions and Policy Implications

Defining Rural Education

Rural education involves schools in low-population areas near towns or agricultural regions with some service access.

Characteristics of Remote Education

Remote education is defined by limited accessibility, requiring travel or seasonal roads with scarce services.

Northern Education Complexity

Northern education is shaped by climate, Indigenous governance, colonial history, and land-based cultures.

Policy Implications

Effective policies must differentiate funding, staffing, and curriculum to meet unique rural, remote, and northern needs.



Human Resources and Leadership Capacity

Teacher Shortage and Turnover

Rural and remote schools struggle with recruiting qualified teachers, leading to high turnover and disruption in learning continuity.

Teaching Principals' Role Strain

Teaching principals balance classroom duties with leadership responsibilities, causing high workload and burnout risks.

Systemic HR Challenges

Challenges include housing shortages, social isolation, limited development, and compensation misaligned with job complexity.

Comprehensive Policy Solutions

Effective strategies combine housing support, mentorship, leadership training, and community recruitment beyond salary increases.



Attendance, Engagement, and Historical Trauma

Challenges in Student Attendance

Absenteeism and disengagement increase in rural and northern schools, impacting graduation and postsecondary success.

Impact of Historical Trauma

Residential school legacy causes mistrust and disengagement in Indigenous communities toward formal education.

Culturally Responsive Education

Schools that embrace local cultures and community partnerships foster trust and improve student engagement.

Policy and Community Collaboration

Aligning education policies with reconciliation and investing in community-led strategies rebuilds trust.



Community Assets and Cultural Strengths

Community Connected Schools

- Schools serve as centers for cultural, social, and civic activities, fostering strong community relationships.

Small Class Benefits

- Small class sizes allow for individualized instruction and stronger teacher-student relationships enhancing student well-being.

Cultural Revitalization Initiatives

- Indigenous language and land-based education programs strengthen student engagement and cultural identity.



Evidence-Informed Policy Directions

Community-Based Educator Pipelines

Supporting local community members to become educators stabilizes staffing and enhances cultural continuity in rural and remote areas.

Mentorship Programs

Mentorship initiatives for early-career educators boost retention rates and build professional confidence over time.

Investment in ICT Infrastructure

Reliable broadband connectivity enables distance education, telehealth, and administrative efficiency in remote communities.

Sustainability-Oriented Education

Education frameworks integrating cultural, environmental, and economic learning promote long-term community resilience.



DIVISION QUESTIONS

Discovery: What Works (The Positive Core)

What are the core strengths, capabilities and resources that make success possible in the communities, schools and families served by the division?

What are some of the promising models, innovations, or insights that the division has utilized to address challenges faced by the communities, schools, and individuals served by the division?

In what ways has the introduction of the Sask DLC offered opportunities that have led to positive outcomes for rural education in the province?



Dream: Envisioning the Future (Possibilities)

What are the “big picture ideas,” or local, national and international issues to which schools (generally, but also in your geographic area) will have to respond in order to remain relevant in today’s society, and how are rural and northern schools preparing students for those issues/realities?

If the division could “double down” on its greatest strengths, what could its future look like in three years?

Prompt: What new, bold, and creative ideas could be pursued if the division knew it couldn't fail?

What role could/should the Sask DLC play in supporting rural and northern education in Saskatchewan?



Design: Planning for Success (Translating Vision to Action)

What provincial actions, policies, and/or strategic initiatives contribute to the success of rural/northern school divisions? How can provincial authorities/partners, the Sask DLC or local divisions, repeat or expand on these? Which ones should be reconsidered, changed, or paused?

What unanticipated outcomes or challenges has the Sask DLC potentially created for rural or northern divisions that could be addressed through a targeted provincial strategy for rural/remote education?

What challenges, if removed, would allow the division to leverage its unique strengths to progress and thrive?

Prompt: What further information, resources or support does your school division need to best uplift its strengths?



Destiny: Sustaining Momentum

How can provincial authorities/partners, local divisions, the Sask DLC, and other partners foster a culture where they regularly recognize and respect each other's strengths?

What 2-3 concrete steps would help drive forward a strengths-based rural, northern and remote education strategy in this province?

How would provincial authorities/partners, the Sask DLC, and local divisions demonstrate commitment to achieving this strategy, and how would they know they've succeeded in this goal?

What is the most important thing that provincial authorities/partners need to know about rural, northern and remote education?



LOOKING AHEAD

- More to come!
- SSBA and SELU will explore opportunities to extend research activities with additional partners to acquire a comprehensive understanding of Northern, Rural and Remote educational system needs and strategies for achieving them.
- The College of Education, the Department of Educational Administration and SELU will investigate possibilities for additional resourcing to expand research and partnership efforts.



QUESTIONS OR COMMENTS?

Thank you for engaging with us
in this important work.

We look forward to working in partnership with
education colleagues across the sector.

