

September 27, 2023

Saskatchewan School Boards Association  
400 – 2222 13<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
Regina, SK S4P 3M7

By Email only: [admin@saskschoolboards.ca](mailto:admin@saskschoolboards.ca)

Dear Panel Members:

**RE: Premier's Board of Education Award for Innovation and Excellence in Education**  
**Submission Deadline: September 30, 2023**

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Please accept this letter and the accompanying documentation as the nomination of Prairie Valley School Division Board of Education for the Premier's Board of Education Award for Innovation and Excellence in Education.

The accompanying document entitled *Governance, Diversity and Prairie Valley Pride*, outlines exceptional governance in our school division over the last decade that has led to important advances in the well-being of students and staff. This innovative governance work has taken many forms and occurred in the context of a changing understanding of diversity in our communities.

The Prairie Valley School Division Board of Education passed a motion in its September board meeting to submit this nomination.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Janet Kotylak  
Board of Education Chair  
Prairie Valley School Division

Cc: Gordon Husband, Director of Education, Prairie Valley Schools  
Prairie Valley School Division Board of Education  
file

**Success in Learning and Life**



The Director of Education at Prairie Valley School Division in 2023-2024 is Gordon Husband and the current Board Chair is Janet Kotylak.

### Introduction

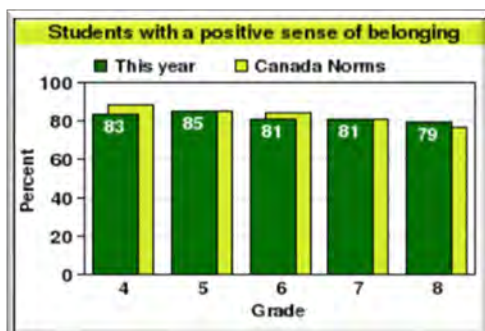
Thank you for the opportunity to nominate Prairie Valley Schools for the 2023 Premier’s Board of Education Award. Our goal in this nomination is to draw your attention to the history of Prairie Valley’s leadership in the area of diversity as well as recent work related to risk management and diversity. As you consider both innovation and excellence, we believe that each of these elements is worthy of recognition. Together they are a story of exemplary governance that includes careful consideration about strategic initiatives to enhance student and staff well-being in the larger contexts of both our school division and society as a whole.



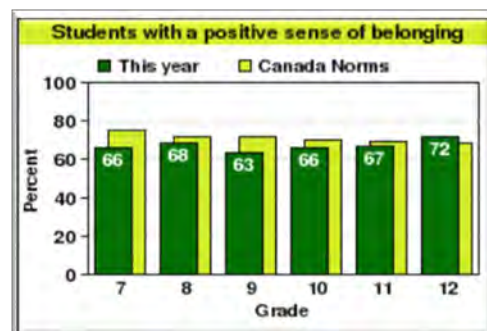
### Student Voice and Governance Development (2012-2016)

In 2011, the Board of Education at Prairie Valley Schools implemented a model for incorporating student voice into school division decision-making called Student Senates. These were an opportunity for Trustees to meet directly with students from across the school division to discuss education from the perspective of the “client”. The Board sponsored a Middle Years Senate and a High School Senate with slightly different formats to align with the different ages of students represented. Each year since then, the Board has met with students using the Senate format in order to more fully understand the needs of students and the impacts of governance work on schools. Diversity and acceptance have been ongoing themes that students have brought to the Senate tables from the beginning.

In 2013, when Trustees had the opportunity to learn more about the national landscape at *Diversity Matters*, the Canadian School Board Association conference in Vancouver, the relationship was clear between what students were saying in Prairie Valley and what was happening – and not happening – across Canada. The picture was clarified further in 2013 with the first implementation of *Tell Them From Me*, the precursor to the *OurSchool* survey employed by Saskatchewan school divisions today. As Trustees reviewed this data and looked



Tell Them From Me Elementary Survey, Prairie Valley Schools, 2013



Tell Them From Me Secondary Survey, Prairie Valley Schools, 2013

ahead to planning for the enhanced academic and graduation outcomes described in the Education Sector Strategic Plan, they saw the connections between bullying, sense of belonging and diversity that were illustrated in the data, in the voices of students at Student Senates and in the professional learning they had completed at the CSBA.

### **Board Monitoring and Resource Allocation (2014-2019)**

As part of the Board Development Plan in 2015, Trustees completed further training about sexual and gender diversity (GSD) from the Canada Research Chair for the Public Understanding of Sexual and Gender Minority Youth. This training was then extended to school-based administrators and finally to all staff at a Division Inservice. At the same time, the Board held two public meetings to engage stakeholders in Prairie Valley communities to discuss a proposed Board policy related to Respect for Human Diversity. While GSD was a significant component of this, the Board ensured that diversity was seen in the widest possible context in order to ensure that other populations were included under the proposed policy. After the public consultation was complete in 2016, the Prairie Valley Board adopted [Board Policy 4.14 Respect for Human Diversity](#), the first policy of its kind established by a Saskatchewan school board.

As part of the budgeting process in 2016, GSD was added to the portfolio of the Health Curriculum consultant in Prairie Valley, and during the 2016-2017 school year, School Community Councils throughout Prairie Valley received inservices from the consultant related to GSD; this work was done in local communities in conjunction with capacity-building sessions for grades K-2 teachers. With the publishing of the *Deepening the Discussion* guide by the Ministry of Education came additional interest in Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) and initial planning for these groups in schools began. At the division level, a Gender and Sexual Diversity Leadership Team was established to guide the early work in schools and division-wide. The timing is notable – Hansard shows that provincial politicians were still debating the establishment of and support for GSAs in 2019 (*Saskatchewan Hansard*, [April 10, 2019, p. 5763](#); [May 6, 2019, p. 5915](#)), years after these had been established in many Prairie Valley Schools.

#### Highlights from 2019-2020

In 2019-2020 student mental health continued to be a primary focus. Prairie Valley School Division continued to offer mental health capacity building strategies to support student and community mental health and wellbeing. Throughout class suspension, the Division shared resources with students, families, community and staff on managing mental health and personal wellness.

Students also participated in the Division's first annual Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Summit. The summit supported students in the Division and surrounding communities.

A number of youth and advisers from outside the school division joined students in Prairie Valley for virtual Gay-Straight Alliance sessions for elementary and high school GSAs/Diversity clubs. These sessions were hosted while classes were suspended and provided opportunity for students to come together to support each other.

Excerpt from *This Is Us: 2020-2021 Strategic Plan Update*. Prairie Valley Schools, November 2020

Additional diversity leadership was shown by members of the Prairie Valley Teachers' Association, who participated in the Regina Pride Parade in 2017. At the end of the 2018-2019 school year, teachers and other school staff also organized the first Prairie Valley GSA Summit at Lumsden High School, an event that has happened every year since, including virtually during the COVID-19 pandemic. By 2019, students and staff affiliated with school GSAs in Prairie Valley were participating actively in the Regina Pride parade together with Board Members and LEADS

staff from the school division with the addition of a Prairie Valley Transportation sponsored school bus.

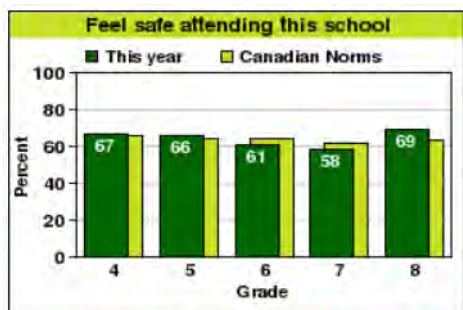
### **Risk Management and Confirmation of Vision (2020-2023)**

With tightening budgets in the years leading up to 2020, the Prairie Valley Board was faced with financial pressures in every area. After struggling to maintain services for students and families between 2017 and 2020, the Board was faced with a need to reorganize many system services in order to protect resources that most directly impacted students and the classroom. As this reorganization was implemented, a key focus was identifying what capacity had been previously built that would allow students to have ongoing opportunities with fewer resources. While there was general understanding that some things would need to change as fewer resources were available to support them, the Board maintained their focus on diversity. Although consultant support was no longer available to the same degree it had been previously, a group of committed school and division staff continued Prairie Valley's work related to GSD with funding support from the school division. In 2022, a division focus group identified active GSAs at 13 different schools in Prairie Valley. In 2023, the GSA Summit was held in Balgonie, the first time it had been hosted by a school other than Lumsden High School. While the Summit will move back to Lumsden in 2024, we look forward to future years where smaller schools will have the opportunity to host and showcase their commitment to diversity as well.

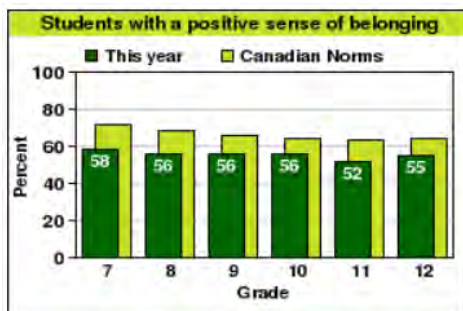


Many things changed in schools and the larger education sector with the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. In the early days of the pandemic these changes were obvious and were largely connected to the immediate reality in schools. Learning and teaching was upended as students moved to home learning and teachers adjusted instructional methods to adapt to an online, distributed classroom. Less obvious were issues of equity that were exacerbated by the pandemic. While society was focused on the pandemic as a medical risk, the Prairie Valley School Division Board of Education began considering additional risks related to the different levels of challenge that students faced because of the changes in the learning environment.

Three learnings emerged for the Prairie Valley Board as a result of these risk management conversations. First, it became obvious that students who were diverse in terms of gender and sexual orientation faced significant impact resulting from isolation. In Prairie Valley, a high proportion of these students did not return to “regular” school in 2020-2021, electing instead to continue the online model that had first been available after all students were sent home in March, 2020. More alarming for the Board was the number of these students who were also unable to return in 2021-2022 when most students returned to the physical classroom. During budget deliberations in 2021, the Board determined that funding for continued remote teaching staff was needed, even though the more general need for online learning had diminished in order to ensure ongoing support for these diverse students.



Tell Them From Me Elementary Survey, Prairie Valley Schools, 2022



Tell Them From Me Secondary Survey, Prairie Valley Schools, 2022

The second risk identified by the Board was an overall trend of worsening outcomes for students, both academically and in terms of student perceptions of school as illustrated by the OurSchool survey. Trustees noted that although significant efforts had been made to promote diversity and acceptance, data related to Sense of Safety and Belonging at school had actually worsened over time. With clear data available related to attendance at GSA Summits and Pride events that individual GSD students felt welcomed at school, the Board considered how much additional decline in Sense of Belonging data might have emerged in the absence of the work that had been done to promote acceptance and celebration of diversity.

The final risk identified by the Board was a broader one related to polarization in society. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and in its aftermath, the Board contemplated risk related to a hardening of positions on a number of fronts. From the Board’s perspective, this was

a result of sentiment expressed about things like vaccination mandates and mask requirements, but Trustees quickly realized that communities in Prairie Valley were also seeing stronger views

being expressed around issues of diversity. From the beginning, the Board’s goal was that Prairie Valley be an agent of bringing people with differing views together rather than forcing them further apart. In 2022, when the Board contemplated the possibility of making a Pride Week proclamation for the first time, they determined that this created additional risk and requested that staff



Trustee Terry Berglund with Prairie Valley GSA Summit Participants, May, 2023

continue to organize Pride activities with the Board’s support in the background for one additional year. In 2023, armed with additional knowledge about student and staff well-being, the Board determined that a proclamation was appropriate and in May, 2023, the Board of Education proclaimed Pride Week in Prairie Valley for the first time. More than a decade of purposeful governance related to respect for human diversity was inherent in the proclamation.

### **Scoring Rubric Questions**

1. Has the Board been directly involved? This work was initiated as a strategic project by the Board through their policy development project and Trustees have followed up annually through the Student Senate model to evaluate student needs and progress. The proclamation came about after risk management conversations related to polarization in Prairie Valley communities and society in general. Trustees have taken an active part in GSA Summits and Pride activities alongside students and staff.
2. Is it innovative? The celebration of and support for diversity in Prairie Valley has been a model for other school divisions since Board Policy 4.14 was adopted in 2016. The Board has supported staff as they developed the GSA Summit model and created community for students and staff where none had existed before. The purposeful timing of the Board’s Pride proclamation



Saskatchewan

## **Virtual Gay-Straight Alliance founded to help Sask. rural LGBTQ youth connect**



GSA founded by and for Prairie Valley School Division students, but can expand



Heidi Atter · CBC News · Posted: May 12, 2020 6:00 AM CDT | Last Updated: May 12, 2020



Taylor Hennessey is one of the students behind a virtual GSA from the Prairie Valley School Division. (Submitted by Taylor Hennessey)

Taylor Hennessey says that when the pandemic closed schools, one of the valuable things it took away was a support network for LGBTQ students.

was targeted at advancing the common good and responding to societal change in a proactive way.

3. Is it sustainable? With the continued guidance of Board Policy 4.14, the acceptance and celebration of diversity is sustainable in Prairie Valley Schools. The financial cost of diversity programming is minimal; the mindset around diversity that lives in Prairie Valley is the more important component of sustainability.

4. Is there client support? Not universally. There continues to be resistance to diversity programming by a minority of mostly adult stakeholders, many of whom hold religious convictions that preclude universal support. This demographic is important to the Board; they are caring parents and committed community members. The work that is happening is intended to bring balance to conversations about diversity and connect people rather than driving them apart. This being said, there is broad-based support by students, staff groups and families for the work that is happening throughout Prairie Valley.

5. Do partners support? The engagement of School Community Councils in every school has been an important component of the Prairie Valley model. Having parents who understand the benefits of acceptance as local partners in every community has smoothed the way for GSA implementation in schools and increasing student and staff



participation in division activities. While Prairie Valley has elected not to use Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) branding, our staff work with this organization to share resources in a mutually supportive way. Since Board Policy 4.14 was implemented in 2016, Boards of Education in two additional school divisions in southern Saskatchewan have adopted similar policies; in one of these cases, the Prairie Valley policy was a critical component of the planning process.

6. Are student outcomes improving? Yes. There is clear evidence that GSD students feel welcomed by their schools and by the school division as a whole. The focus on diversity in Prairie Valley has given these students a voice. In August 2022, students led inservice sessions for teachers and other staff as part of the year beginning inservice; over the course of 7 years, Prairie Valley has moved from learning about GSD from a Canada Research Chair to learning from students in our schools. When students see themselves in their school and their school division, wellness outcomes improve. When students are well, they achieve to their potential academically. GSD Students are engaged, thriving and alive at school as a result of the positive focus on diversity in Prairie Valley. We have more work to do, but we are moving toward our goal for all students and staff of *Success in Learning and Life*.



Prairie Valley Board of Education Pride Week Proclamation, May, 2023