



*Saskatchewan Rivers
Public School Division*

Excellence for Every Learner

**kahkiyaw awâsisak
sâkihâwak:
*All Children are Loved***

Early Learning:
Affirming Culture &
Strengthening Community

A Nomination by:

Saskatchewan Rivers Public School Division

for the

Premier's Board of Education Award for
Innovation and Excellence in Education

September 30, 2023

Board Chair: Darlene Rowden

Preface

The Old Ones Are Calling Us

tawow nihwakohmahkantihk
(Welcome all my relatives)
asmina êwêh maci nêhiyawêyêk kihtwam
(We will be learning to speak Cree once again)

My language, the Cree Language
Was rarely spoken by many
I only heard it behind closed doors on the reserve
Or at powwow, round dance, and in ceremony

Many didn't understand what was being said
They only went along with what the others would do
And agree as to what was said to be good,
That it would benefit them in blind faith

The language is only spoken by the old ones in the South,
Where the strength in spirituality is strong
In the North, the language is strong
But the spirituality is low,
And many have lost ceremony

The black robes, robbed us of not only our language
But our way of life, our ways of knowing
They took our prayers, our relationship to the land,
And language we had with the animals.

Our "Land Based Learning" that often assisted us
In the ways we lived, only with what mahmokawenaw
gave us
Our medicines, with plants, and herbs were provided for
us to use
They gave us the healthy lifestyle we needed to live in
this harsh place

We need to go back to the old ways
Back to when we could speak in our own language
And teach the children of whom we borrowed our land
from
To keep it safe for when they need it



We need to go back to the old ways
Back to when we could speak in our own language
And teach the children of whom we borrowed our land
from
To keep it safe for when they need it

We go back to where paskwawi môstôs gave us what we
needed

Our food, clothing, housing,
And most of all our ceremony
These are what is needed to get back to who we are

nêya nêhiyaw, nêya nêhiyawan
tapiskoc nohtawê, êkwa nihkawê
tapiskoc nimôsom, êkwa nohkom,
êkwa nicapanak

And all who have gone before me whom the language
had been taken from forcefully
ninahskomon

Victor Thunderchild Jr
Decendant of kapitikou better known as
Chief Thunderchild
Signatory to Treaty 6, in 1879



About the Project

Kahkiyaw awâsisak sâkihâwak is a Cree term meaning “all children are loved”. This is a description of the intertwined work of our Indigenous perspectives, curriculum and instruction, and early learning teams in Saskatchewan Rivers Public School Division (SRPSD). Over the last several years the SRPSD Board has supported, and directed work to innovate in our early childhood program recruitment, retention, and ongoing improvement in student learning outcomes. In the Board’s 2021-2024 Strategic Plan the Board identified five key priorities including:

- Learning and Innovation
 - Students experience joyful learning that fulfills current needs and provides a foundation for future success.
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
 - Students are supported to sustain and strengthen their resiliency and mental wellness.
- Inclusion and Cultural Responsiveness
 - Students are affirmed and diversity is supported and celebrated.
- Citizenship and Relationships
 - Students demonstrate active citizenship and are supported by engaged families and effective partnership.
- Governance and Leadership
 - Leaders are open approachable, accountable, and responsibility serve the needs of students, staff, and the community



These priorities have helped focus the work of refining our early learning programs. This work is comprised of three strands:

- The affirmation of culture in all classrooms through Indigenous resources and respect to Indigenous ways of knowing.
- The introduction of Cree and Michif language programs beginning in prekindergarten and kindergarten programs and extending through to grade 3.

The Indigenization of pedagogy through the Experiential Play Based Learning Model.

The focus on developing classroom spaces that affirm culture through the inclusion of Indigenous resources, and respect of Indigenous ways of knowing came about through the demographics of our school division. SRPSD has a mix of urban and rural school communities with a self-declared First Nations, Métis populations of 50% for the entire division. When we look at our urban schools in isolation this self declared population is 68%. Ensuring that all of our students see themselves in their classroom environments, and in their own learning had to be a priority.

“Students need to see themselves represented in both resources and through language. So if students see themselves represented in the classroom they are able to make connections and draw on background knowledge.... I want students to make connections immediately, if they are from a Cree background and we are reading Cree stories I want them to say, yes, this is what it's like in my home. Or if they are Métis, yes this is what it's like in my home. I don't want to rely on a Eurocentric definition from a textbook.”

~ Kelsa Henry Remy, Early Learning Educator

“Whenever I am lesson planning or unit planning, I always find Indigenous resources that I can use on a daily basis. I do this, again, because students need to see themselves reflected in the classroom. My classroom is mostly made up of First-Nations and Métis students and I would like them to see themselves in our classroom.”

~ Kelli Stangeland, Early Learning Educator



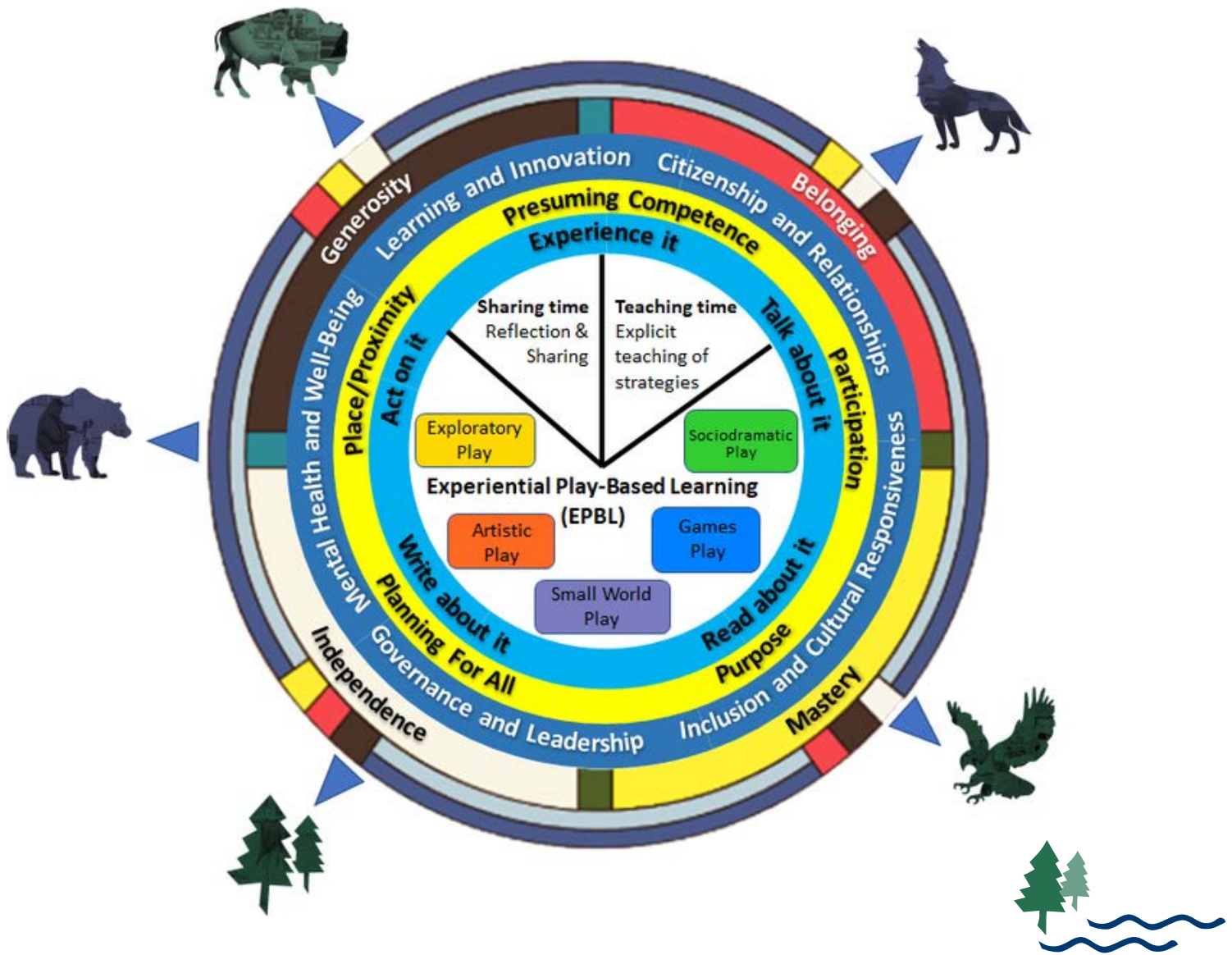
Exploring and implementing language revitalization programs began before the current strategic plan when the Board approved the creation of a Cree Language Program at John Diefenbaker Public School beginning in the 2020-2021 school year. This proposed that Cree Language programming focus on regaining the original language of the Cree, or nêhiyawêwin, and be introduced at an early age. The expectation of the program is to assist in the personal growth and language development of, not only the Indigenous youth, but also for other students who are willing to acquire the Cree language.

The program was established honoring that Cree is an oral language and is best learned through the spoken word. Knowing that traditionally, Cree language would have been the first language a child would learn. Lullabies, songs, words of encouragement, discussion words, and the language of the classroom creates an immersive environment for students to acquire the language. The program includes support from Indigenous resource people to support language acquisition and to bring forth knowledge systems, as they are knowledge keepers.

Finally the Indigenization of pedagogy not only directly reflects the priorities of the school division in learning and innovation, inclusion and cultural responsiveness, but also is a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action. This work is encompassed in the SRPSD Experiential Play Based Learning Model.



SRPSD Experiential Play Based Learning Model



These three strands weave together to create an innovation that allows staff, students, and the community to envision, and realize classrooms where every child can see that they belong and are an important part of their school community.

kahkiyaw awâsisak sâkihâwak
All Children are Loved.



Program Goals

Ultimately the goals of this work are to meet the priorities outlined in the SRPSD 2021-2024 Strategic Plan.

Learning and Innovation:

Students experience joyful learning that fulfills current needs and provides a foundation for future success.

Joyful learning environments are culturally affirming, and create space for children to learn and explore in ways that are child centered. Language programming enriches the ability for students to experience culture and connect to community by being able to express themselves through traditional language. Experiential Play-Based Learning is the vehicle to provide joyful learning experiences for all students.

Mental Health and Wellbeing:

Students are supported to sustain and strengthen their resiliency and mental wellness.

Ensuring that our students belong to a school community where they can see themselves and their families in a positive light in their classrooms from their very first experiences in school creates a foundation for strengthening resiliency, and supporting mental wellness. Access to language programming further affirms this for students enrolled. The multiple entry points, and pathways to success that are naturally embedded in experiential play-based learning helps maintain classrooms that support a mentally healthy learning environment where thoughtful risk is encouraged and debriefed.

Inclusion and Cultural Responsiveness:

Students are affirmed and diversity is supported and celebrated.

Through the use of Indigenous resources, inviting Indigenous community members including Elders and Knowledge Keepers into our classrooms students feel included. Affirming culture for both students and staff from their first interactions in the classroom in our preschool and kindergarten programs further confirms that their culture and being are honored in our schools.



The very existence of our language programs show all students the importance of Indigenous language revitalization. Finally the Experiential Play Based Learning Model creates organic experiences for students to explore diversity and inclusion in the structure of a classroom with supportive adults.

Citizenship and Relationships:

Students demonstrate active citizenship and are supported by engaged families and effective partnerships

Active citizenship in the early years is children being able to advocate for themselves in their classrooms communities, and help meet the social emotional needs of their classmates through age appropriate play. This is further enhanced through strong parent partnerships in classrooms that are supported by our KidsFirst Early Years School and Community Liaison.

Governance and Leadership:

Leaders are open, approachable, accountable, and responsibly serve the needs of students, staff, and the community

At the Board level this is accomplished through the guidance of our Elders Council. Division teams provide high quality professional development opportunities for staff at all levels to ensure that capacity is developed to serve the needs of all students, and strengthen our community.

Board Influence and Participation

The Board influence of this work is widespread. It is rooted in the strategic plan, and the work to develop this plan in a way that affirms culture through the structure and design of the plan.

The Board further supported this work through the development and funding of the Cree Language Program at John Diefenbaker Public School which began in the 2020/2021 school year.



**(d) Motions from the Closed Session of March 9, 2020:
#20R-23**

Moved by B. Hollick that the following motions be brought forward:

**3. That the Board approve a Cree Language Program at John Diefenbaker Public School beginning in the 2020-2021 school year.
Carried.**

This work was further supported through partnership with the Métis Nation who fund Michif Language Programs at Queen Mary Public School and St. Louis Public School which has been operating since the 2021/2022 school year.

The Board receives, reviews and discusses several reports throughout the year that highlight the work in the early years (and beyond) to affirm culture, and indigenize pedagogy. These include:

- Student Learning Accountability Report
- School Learning Improvement Plans
- Accountability Report
- TRC – Call to Action Priority Progress (mid year review)
- Selected Program Initiatives (Global Sports Academy, Cree Language Program, Michif Language Program and others)
- TRC – Call to Action Priority Progress (year end review)

Seasonally, the Board hosts a pipe ceremony and meet with an advisory council of local elders to set direction, seek guidance, and build their own capacity in cultural practices. Advocacy for early learning including appropriate funding for full day/everyday kindergarten programming is indicated as a long term priority in the Board Advocacy Plan.





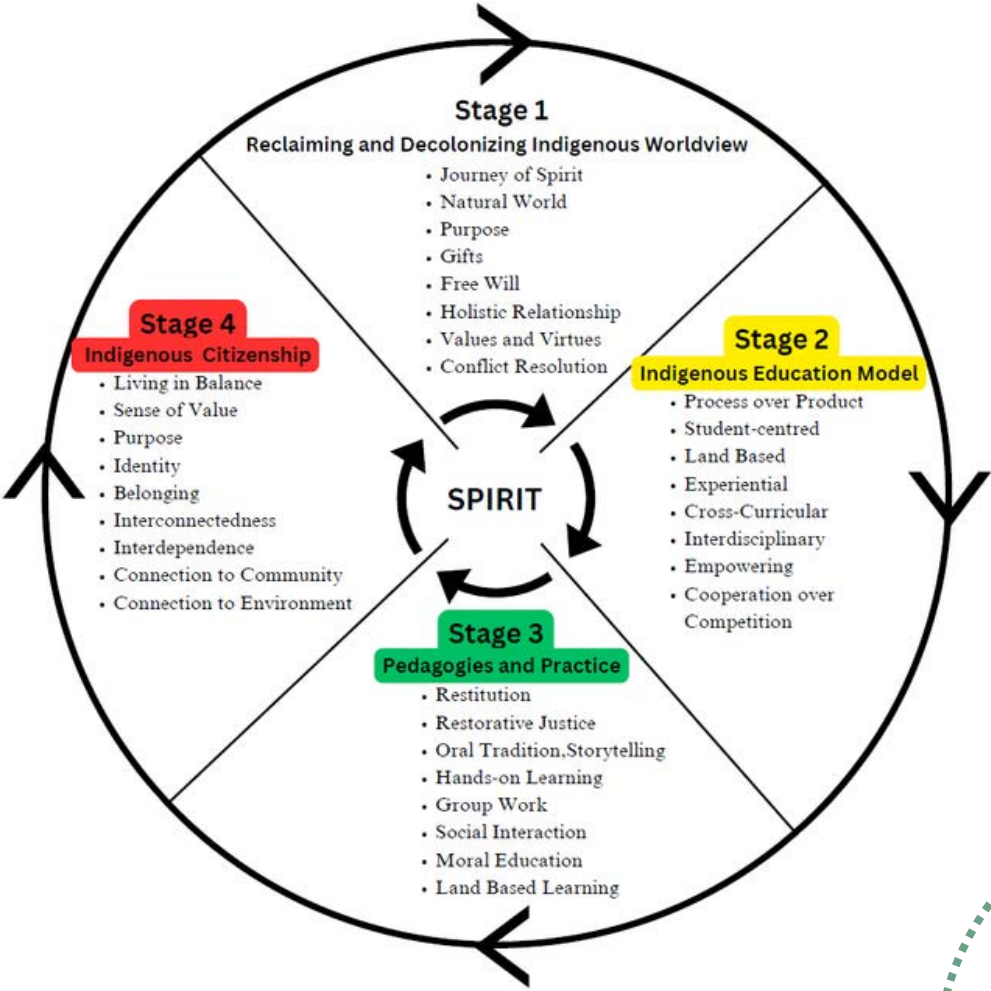
Innovations

The evolution of the Saskatchewan Rivers School Division's early learning programming was driven by the Board's desire to act on the Calls to Action for education and beyond from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. This desire has led the Board to pursue several different courses of action to enhance the relationships with our Indigenous partners and to develop foundational educational programming that not only brings curriculum to life in meaningful ways, but also brings joy, and culturally affirming practices into our classrooms.

Although ideas like language programming, and incorporating Indigenous perspectives are not unique as boards in the province have developed multiple programs to this end, the innovation here is using the decolonization and indigenization of early learning to create a foundation for learning that is embedded in experiential, play based learning that affirms culture, and infuses joy into learning.



The Board has worked closely with the Elder’s Council comprising three local Elders and one Knowledge Keeper to guide their work in honoring Indigenous perspectives, and rising to the TRC calls to action. Through this work the Decolonizing Indigenous Thought and the Development of an Indigenous Education Model framework developed by local Knowledge Keeper Mike Relland has become the framework of the work of decolonizing pedagogy in SRPSD. The development and refinement of the Experiential Play-Based Learning model (as well as our Literacy, Math, and High School Learning Models) has used this framework as a guide, and a lens. This model is enriched through Cree and Michif language programming, and opens the door to culturally affirming practices in all classrooms.



*Condensed Version Of Relland’s
 Conceptual Framework
 (full framework in appendix)*



Sustainability

The work of this innovation is intertwined with multiple initiatives in the school division which provides a foundational network for the work to be sustained. At the core this innovation is an example of the work of our Indigenous perspectives team permeating the work of all to meet the needs of 50% of our student population who have self identified as First Nations or Métis . These inclusive practices also work to improve the experience for all students.

Departments/initiatives supporting this work:

Indigenous Perspectives Team:

This team not only presents multiple professional development sessions to build the capacity and understanding of all staff in Indigenous perspectives, the team also helps schools and classrooms work to invite Elders and Knowledge Keepers into our schools, and to work with students.

Curriculum and Learning:

The Experiential Play Based Learning Model and the concepts tied to it to decolonize our classrooms is embedded into full division professional development in our Leadership Learning Communities. It is also embedded in unique professional development opportunities open to all teachers, as well as elbow to elbow coaching work in classrooms for our early learning staff.

KidsFirst Partnership:

In May 2021 KidsFirst Prince Albert and SRPSD created a position titled “KidsFirst Early Years School and Community Liaison.” This role has supported families with connecting to and maintaining enrollment in our prekindergarten and kindergarten programs. As this work has progressed it also encompasses responsibilities such as; promoting family wellness, and mental health, truth and reconciliation, and building trusting connections with First Nations Families in the city of Prince Albert.

SRPSD Teacher Resource Centre (TRC):

The TRC houses district owned play based learning kits with all of the resources for entire units including all the stories, toys, equipment etc. a teacher would need to provide a high quality Experiential Play-Based Learning experience in their classroom with minimal preparation time. The TRC is dedicated to use a portion of its funding to maintain and create new kits each year.



Stakeholder Support for the Innovation

Support of our Elders Council

“Think how rich their lives are going to be if they start tapping into their spirit and the gifts that they have been given and the curiosity that they have at such a young age. “ ~ Elder, Liz Settee

Support of Parents

The following quotes come from parents who responded to a survey about the Metis Language Programming.

“They need to know the truth about the past, and they need their culture back. Better to start off as kids.”

“I love that this program provides my child with the opportunity to gain knowledge about his Metis heritage as this isn't something that I was able to learn about growing up and I believe it is beneficial to teach the young generation about their heritage so it isn't lost.”

Support of Early Learning Educators

“Your students will be so excited to see themselves in the books that you choose. They will share stories. They will make connections. You will learn so much about them. It's a way of bringing all of them into the classroom together.” ~ Early Learning Teacher, Kelsa Henry Remy

“Moments, like when one of my students proudly declared that she was indigenous to a group of students, classmates, and myself that celebrated all parts of who she is.” ~ Early Learning Teacher, Kelli Stangeland

“It's just time, our Indigenous children, our Indigenous community, deserve it. They deserve to learn who they are.

They deserve to learn about their culture. Your language just deserves a place in our school system where they feel valued and just feel connected. It should feel like a place where you could teach them holistically, where they can learn holistically.”

~ Early Learning Teacher, Cree Language Program, Orlanda Chaboyer

Partnerships in Support of the Innovation

The original partnership in this journey was a community consultation partnership led by Victor Thunderchild to create the initial report for the board to create our Cree Language Program.

The partnership with the Métis Nation created the Michif Language and Culture early years program. Additionally, this partnership includes program lead teachers at each site that:

- Support the Kindergarten teachers with the implementation of Michif language and cultural teachings.
- Development of language and cultural specific resources.
- Make connections to Métis Elders and Knowledge Keepers and facilitate their connection to the school community in the development of Michif Language Nests.
- Support the implementation of Michif Language and Métis culture in Pre-K and other primary classrooms.
- Facilitate a Michif Language and Métis Culture Teacher Learning Community to connect the urban and rural teachers as they implement resources and support the language development of students.

SRPSD has partnered with Muskoday First Nation to deliver Tipi Teachings for all of our schools, allowing schools to align their social emotional programming to these teachings from Preschool on.

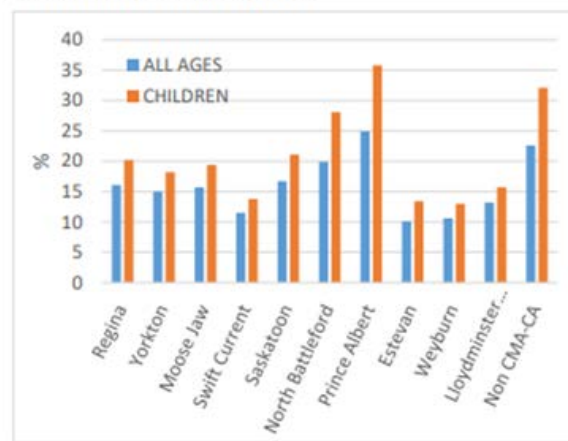
Finally our partnership with KidsFirst, more importantly the Early Years Community Liaison is a partnership that bridges our families with necessary community supports to sustain attendance and support learning. In the 2022/23 school year our liaison was able to transition 35 children into our prekindergarten programs.



Evidence of Improved Student Achievement

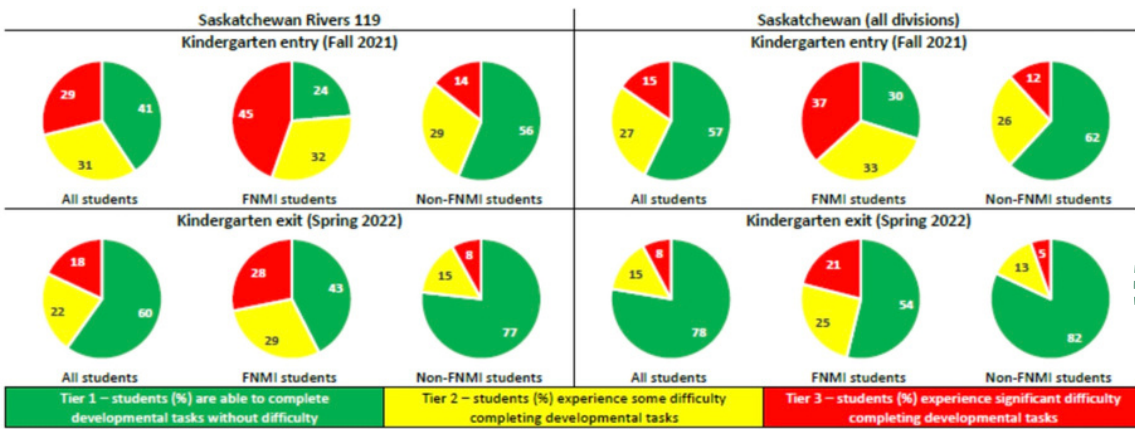
To understand the evidence of student achievement in SRPSD one must first understand the context of our communities. In the City of Prince Albert 25% of the population lives below the poverty line, and just over 35% of all children in the city are part of this population according to the Saskatchewan Child and Family Poverty Report of 2021. This report relies on data from 2019 and makes the assumption that data in more recent years will show an increase in the levels of poverty.

Figure 4. Poverty rates for all ages and children, Saskatchewan cities, 2019



From The Saskatchewan Child and Family Poverty Report, 2021

The levels of child poverty impact school readiness of the young learners who join our classrooms. This is evident in our EYE data year over year. Below is an example of the 2021/22 SRPSD EYE data which shows the gap in school readiness for children in SRPSD as compared to the rest of the province.



Tier 1 – students (%) are able to complete developmental tasks without difficulty

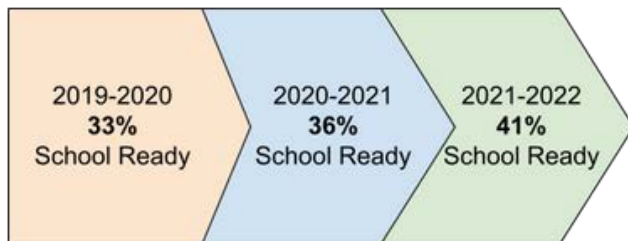
Tier 2 – students (%) experience some difficulty completing developmental tasks

Tier 3 – students (%) experience significant difficulty completing developmental tasks

*totals may not add to 100 due to rounding



Where the success of our early learning innovations is being seen and celebrated is in the improvement of this baseline EYE data. The image below shows the progression of the number of kindergarten students achieving a “Tier 1” result on the EYE which is an indicator of being school ready beginning in 2019-2020 which was the year before the implementation of our Cree Language Program which marked the beginning of this journey.



The 8% increase in students arriving in kindergarten ready to learn is an improvement to celebrate in itself, but coupled with the fact that this increase was also fostered during the COVID-19 pandemic where most measures of learning have decreased across the field of education this increase is truly impressive.

Conclusion

Approaching Early Childhood programming through the lens of ensuring all children are loved has helped SRPSD to develop partnerships and programming to allow all of our young learners to see themselves, and their families reflected in our classrooms. Supporting children and families to attend regularly through the KidsFirst Community Support Liaison has shown initial success and, with trusting relationships now developed with First Nations families in the community this success is likely to grow.



Decolonizing and Indigenizing the practices in our classrooms is likely to have the widest reach of all the practices intertwined to develop Early Learning Programming to meet this vision. Not only does this work directly impact our preschool, kindergarten and grades one through three classrooms but it is expanding into the middle years. Creating joyful, connected, inclusive learning spaces for all children in SRPSD.



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All Children are Loved

Appendix

Appendix A:
[SRPSD Strategic Plan 2021-2024](#)

Appendix B:
[Cree Language \(Nêhiyawêwin\) Program Report](#)

Appendix C:
[Saskatchewan Rivers Indigenous Inclusion: Early Childhood Programming Video](#)

Appendix D:
[Decolonizing Indigenous Thought and the development of an Indigenous Education Model \(Relland 2022\)](#)

Appendix E:
[Canadian Playful Schools Network Presentation](#)

Appendix F:
[KidsFirst Early Years School and Community Liaison Pilot Executive Summary – Year Two](#)

Appendix G:
[Saskatchewan Child and Family Poverty Report](#)

