

**ST. ANNE SCHOOL INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING COMMUNITY**

**ENGAGING OUR LEARNERS**



**Nominated by: GSCS School Board  
For the 2015 Premier's Board of Education Award  
For Innovation and Excellence in Education  
September 2015  
Board Chair: Diane Boyko  
Director of Education: Greg Chatlain**

## About the Project: Inquiry Based Learning Community

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St. Anne School, built in 1976, is a kindergarten to Grade 8 school located in Saskatoon's River Heights neighbourhood. The school's 200 students represent various cultural, family and socio-economic backgrounds. The growing student population indicates that St. Anne has become a destination for families who choose inquiry-based learning. It now has students from eight different Saskatoon neighbourhoods. Approximately 12 per cent of students are First Nations or Métis, 25 per cent are from another country of origin and approximately 10 per cent have diverse learning and behavioural needs. St. Anne also has a 45-space daycare to serve our ever-increasing population.

Five years ago, the staff at St. Anne School embarked on their journey to transform their school into a centre of inquiry-based learning. They wanted to shift from traditional teaching to an innovative model of inquiry-based learning as the vehicle for lifelong learning. Supporting the Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools (GSCS) Board of Education's priority of improving student achievement in a faith based environment, the school chose this model to teach students transferable skills such as decision making, problem solving and collaborative learning in an environment with rapidly changing technological requirements.

### What is inquiry-based learning?

Inquiry-based learning is a process of collaborative explorations in which students use critical, logical, and creative-thinking skills to raise questions of personal interest and seek their answers. Students are driven by their own curiosity and wonder, and are engaged in their learning. Investigation is used to build understanding, meaning, and knowledge creating meaningful ways to share and represent their learning.

This learning model is based on four pillars: cross-curricular instruction, creating an environment conducive to learning, building positive relationships, and ongoing assessment and improvement. These four pillars will be discussed in detail later.

### How was it implemented?

- St. Anne staff members sought to enhance their understanding of inquiry-based before they brought it to their own school. St. Anne staff visited two schools in Calgary to see a form of inquiry in action.
- As they transitioned to an inquiry-based school, St. Anne staff members started the process of exploring their beliefs about children. The staff committed to the belief that all students were able to learn, and as a staff, it was our position that we would need to engage students and promote positive outcomes.
- Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings are planned by staff, and all staff meet every two weeks to learn together. Professional reading, collaborative sharing, student data and reflections are an integral part of the process. Staff complete four spot checks throughout the year to evaluate progress and adjust plans as need to improve learning outcomes.

*"Inquiry is an approach to learning whereby students find and use a variety of sources of information and ideas to increase their understanding of a problem, topic or issue of importance. It requires more than simply answering questions or getting a right answer. It espouses **investigation, exploration, search, quest, research, pursuit and study**. It is enhanced by involvement with a **community of learners**, each learning from the other in social interaction."*  
(Kuklthau, Maniotes & Caspari, 2007, p. 2)

- St. Anne staff and parents constructed the aforementioned four pillars of inquiry learning.
- Environmental improvements included soft lighting and comfortable spaces, and student-produced visual representations in the classrooms are used to promote curiosity.
- The collaborative culture is strong and embedded in practice, supporting new staff members joining the St. Anne team. The support includes inquiry support for instruction, assessment, building relationships through partnerships and developing an appropriate learning environment.

## Evidence of Direct Board Participation and Influence

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### Leadership

- The Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Board of Education has supported the St. Anne School community in the transformation of its learning environment. The board has dedicated resources for staff members to begin their professional growth and learning about the inquiry-based teaching and learning process.
- Funding was also provided to acquire the school furniture needed to support the move away from desks in each classroom to collaborative learning tables.
- Since these initial steps, the board has followed St. Anne’s journey and has participated in school tours and classroom presentations by both students and parents.
- The board continues to support the school as it develops local and national partnerships that enhance its programming.
- The board encouraged St. Anne to participate in action research about its new direction. St. Anne chose to partner with University of Saskatchewan, College of Education researchers and the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation’s Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation.
- In spring 2012, the Board of Education held a planning meeting at St. Anne that allowed trustees to tour the school and meet with students and staff in several classrooms to see progress of the physical transformation involved.

*Observing the physical transformation of the school was exciting, and seeing the learning results is proof our investment in inquiry-based learning at St. Anne School has paid off.” —Diane Boyko, CSCS Board Chair*

### Resource Allocation

- Initially, the GSCS board provided 30 per cent FTE inquiry support for the first year of implementation, allowing teachers to work and learn alongside one another. Now that inquiry has become a part of the school culture, the amount of FTE for inquiry support time has been decreased to 10 per cent in the current school year to support partnership development and support staff needs (see figure on pg 8).
- Furniture appropriate to the inquiry learning environment has been added to the school including tables and chairs for all classrooms. Display cabinets have been added in hallways and classrooms to promote documentation of learning.

## Monitoring

- The board has tracked the progress of inquiry learning by reviewing reports of literacy data including benchmark reading data, EYE results and CAT-4 results.
- Tell Them From Me (TTFM) engagement data has been shared with the Board of Education.
- GSCS board members have toured the school during inquiry celebrations, family engagement evenings and special events where inquiry learning progress was shared.

## Innovative Nature of Inquiry-Based Learning

In partnership with parents and private businesses, St. Anne School staff continue to develop 21st-century learners by encouraging students to be curious and creative, providing learners time to explore using a variety of tools, resources, and technology.

*“To ask questions and that you have your own mind, and you ask questions and you learn because it’s what we are meant to do, not doing what I am telling them to do.” —parent*

## Pillars of Inquiry-Based Learning

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The pillars of learning the model created by St. Anne staff ensure consistent pedagogy from which teachers develop inquiry studies. The pillars of the model include instruction, learning and environment, relationships and assessment.

### Instruction

Inquiries are always designed as cross-curricular. Students are forced to draw upon material from a variety of subjects to achieve the desired learning outcomes. Therefore, it is imperative that teachers are fluent in their curricula. Students work within an overarching question that helps connect their independent questions to the curriculum. Most inquiries target 40 or more outcomes within the inquiry. Learning is holistic, authentic and independent.



**Grades 4/5 and 5/6 Economy/Business Inquiry**

Can I effectively create, market and promote a product through building an understanding of practice of the economy?

*“Group work is one of my favorite things because it lets me get to know a lot of people better. I like getting to know people in different ways and understanding them better. When we were working on our Rube Goldberg machines, I learned what people’s strengths were and how to use them to their advantage”. —Grade 6 student*

What drives inquiry learning? Inquiry learning depends on the question created by the students. They have the opportunity to personalize the direction of learning, leading to a more authentic and genuine learning

experience. When the student exercises his/her curiosity by forming a meaningful question, s/he will be more engaged in the process. From there, students continue to make more connections and ask more questions.

Due to the change in culture and pedagogy, the staff work in a highly collaborative environment, meeting on a continual basis as the inquiry unfolds. This process has become embedded as part of the culture of the school. Everyone involved supports the process, including the teacher librarian, the inquiry support teacher and community partners.

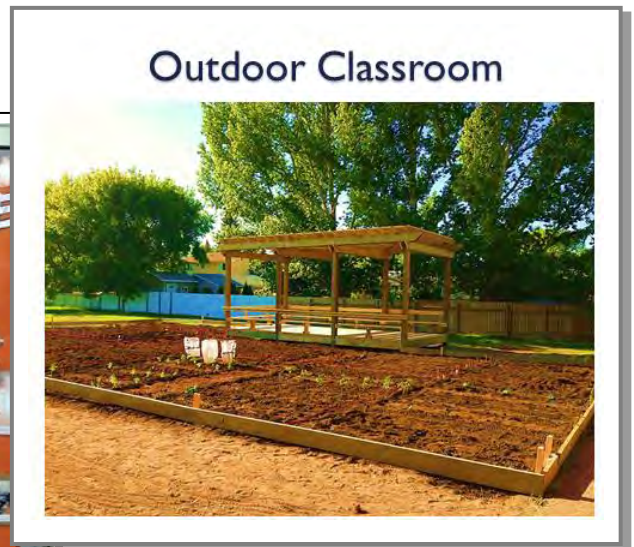
The staff has journeyed to a common vision from rote learning to inquiry, blocking inquiry time in timetables, completing authentic documentation and collaborating on a regular basis.

### Learning and Environment

The school's unique learning environment is evident when entering the building. The hallways are filled with documentation panels, including student samples, student and teacher reflections, and documentation of the learning journey, empowering students to account for and visually represent their learning.

The staff at St. Anne have made significant changes to the school's learning environment. Students now expect this model to support and enhance their learning experience. Permanent changes involved lighting, tables, chairs, the atelier, the outdoor classroom, feature walls and panels, comfortable spaces, integrating use of mobile devices and legacy works.

*Desks are gone and have been replaced with tables to facilitate group work and collaboration. We work in groups, looking up on the internet, searching in books. You can do your own thing. It's fun because we get to decide and search. You don't want someone to tell you the answers." —Grade 3/4 student*



Environmental projects, such as the outdoor classroom and St. Anne community garden—that houses 29 gardening families—were built with the help of the community and wouldn't be

possible without partners like Akzo Nobel, AC Flooring, CTV, Loraas Recycling and many others.

The learning environment reaches beyond the classroom walls. It promotes wonder and learning in all aspects of life. The documentation boards tell the story of the inquiry study. Common elements include the big question, curriculum outcomes, indicators, teacher reflections, photographs of student engagement, student quotes, samples of student work, books, experts and artifacts that supported the inquiry.

## Relationships

What do relationships look like in an inquiry school?

One of the most substantial benefits in the school was the growth and deepening of relationships. Inquiry learning needs to be authentic for students to grow in curiosity and questioning, therefore, it is crucial to be authentic educators and to develop trust. That has become part of the culture at St. Anne.



“As a caretaker, the school environment has opened up a whole new way of doing things. I find myself accommodating the creative changes. I work more with students and staff than the old way.” —Dwight Wright

St. Anne School has invested in positive and creative relationships among staff, between staff and students, and among students, parents and staff. The impact of the positive environment is evident in the feedback on how our students feel about their learning.

## Assessment

To create a 21st-century learner, assessment needs to be vigorous and authentic. Because students were involved in creating their learning tasks and could represent their learning in different ways, they experienced metacognition. They learned about how they learned and discovered strengths in learning through the inquiry approach.

Since we use Backwards By Design approach (accepted by all staff when planning an inquiry) students know what the final expectation is and can find their own routes to that goal. This may involve creating their own rubric as a group or a class.

## Professional Learning Community

- The Professional Learning Community (PLC) at St. Anne is unique in that the staff have committed to meeting biweekly. The PLC is grassroots in nature because it is planned and delivered by staff members. Staff believe this approach is crucial to improve teaching practice and refine pedagogy, leading to improved outcomes for students.



Parent experts give feedback on student business plans for Gr. 4/5 and 5/6 Business Inquiry

- Each PLC begins with teachers sharing their experiences and practices with inquiry-based learning in their own classrooms.
- Staff members consistently work collaboratively. It is this synergy that has played a large role in the school's rapid transformation.
- The movement from rote learning to inquiry-based learning continues with authentic cross-curricular connections; blocking inquiry time into timetables; authentic documentation and assessment; ever-increasing engagement by staff, students and parents; a dynamic, student-centred learning environment; and a learning community that is community-owned and continues to evolve.

## First Nations and Métis Education

Even though the First Nations and Métis (FNM) student population is 12 per cent in our school, our staff place a high priority on designing inquiries focusing on First Nations and Métis ways of knowing. Teacher planning templates include sections for FNM worldviews using outcomes and indicators. A recent ArtsSmart Inquiry included the worldview, spoken word through rap, dance and performing on stage demonstrating strong understanding of content.

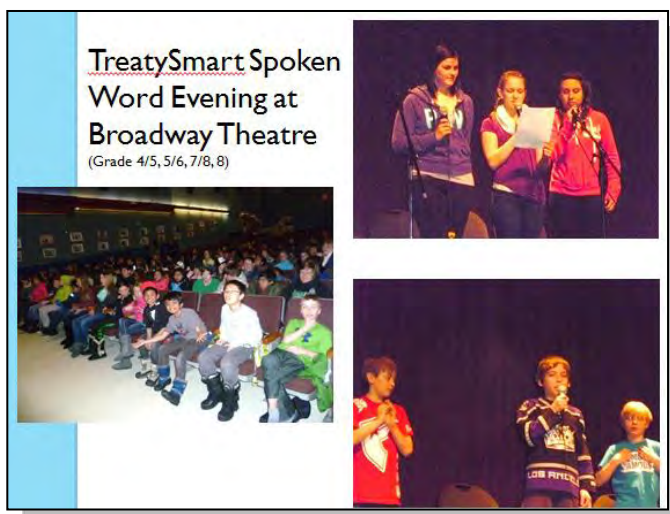
## Sustainability of the Innovation

The sustainability of St. Anne's inquiry-based learning community is secure, based on the support it enjoys from the board and division administration on several levels, along with the professional interest it is generating from teachers, both inside and outside of the school division.

**Staffing:** Through mentoring, new staff quickly transition into the strong collaborative inquiry culture established in the school.

**Teacher Collaboration:** All inquiry units begin with a collaborative process benefiting from input by several professionals, experts, and resources. St. Anne has become a model for other teachers using Backwards By Design to lead the collaborative planning process. Staff use a template for planning in which several key areas are identified, including First Nations and Métis ways of knowing.

**Sharing Inquiry Practice with Others:** St. Anne School has become a key resource for other learning communities such as Principals' Short Course (Saskatchewan Professional Development Unit), U of S College of Education cohorts, media, administrators, and schools within the division, the province and in Flin Flon,



TreatySmart Spoken Word Evening at Broadway Theatre  
(Grade 4/5, 5/6, 7/8, 8)

Manitoba. Presentations have also been made to the Sciematics Conference, Prince Albert Teachers’ Association Convention, Taking Your Place in the Professional Community Conference, and the Learning From Practice Conference. To date, the school has hosted more than 250 people, excluding parents and families, who have come to tour and learn about inquiry-based learning.

**Cost Related to Benefits**

**Cost of Training**

Initially, staff and administration traveled to Calgary to visit and tour two inquiry-based schools.

**Cost of Staffing**

School Year	Teacher Inquiry Support Time	Cost
2012-13	30% FTE	\$24 543
2013-14	20% FTE	\$16 236
2014-15	20% FTE	\$16 544
2015-16	10% FTE	\$8 429

**Evidence of Improved Student Learning**

In the 2015-2016 school year, St. Anne is in the fifth year of implementing inquiry-based learning. Throughout the journey, St. Anne has had numerous opportunities to evaluate its success and solicit feedback from students, staff and parents. The on-going monitoring and feedback has been essential in supporting and celebrating the journey to improve student outcomes. These opportunities include: staff feedback on student engagement and student learning; student response to documentation and Tell Them From Me survey results; student, staff, parent and community member feedback and perceptions collected from the McDowell research grant; and student data derived from various assessments.

*“Inquiry has given me experience to learn new things, grow my knowledge and have fun at the same time.” —student*

The data gathered for the McDowell grant verified our beliefs that students have experienced deep, experiential learning through the inquiry process.

The 2014 (TTFM) data revealed a national strong downward trend of middle-year students becoming more disengaged in their learning. However, the data for St. Anne School reveals an upward trend in engagement during the middle years.

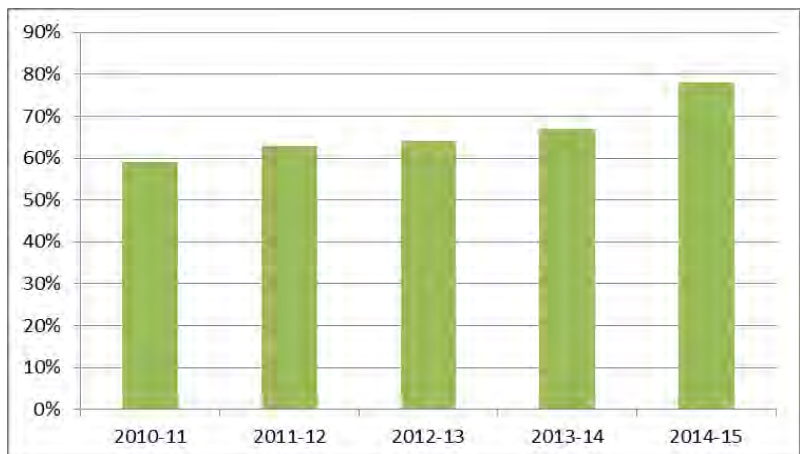


Students who are interested and motivated	Relevance	Students with positive behaviour at school
<p>86% of students were interested and motivated whereas the Canadian norm for these grades is 61%. The Canadian norm for boys is 58% and at St. Anne it was 81%. Girls at St. Anne were at 91%.</p>	<p>Students find classroom instruction relevant to their lives as students rated it 8.1 out of 10; the Canada norm for these grades is 7.4.</p>	<p>The data indicates the increase in effort at the middle year's level above the national norm. We assume this is due to the nature of the projects and variety of learning opportunities provided to students</p>

### Reading Levels

St. Anne reading levels improved each year that inquiry learning was implemented. The school Benchmark results in reading for Grades 1-8 reveals an increase from 59 to 78 per cent reading at or above grade level.

School Year	Students at or above grade level reading
2010-11	59%
2011-12	63%
2012-13	64%
2013-14	67%
2014-15	78%



Staff and parents witnessed and noted increased student engagement and increased understanding of material learned. Students engaged in inquiry were more on-task, as a result of having more voice in and direction of their own learning. Further, students readily speak to their learning and share their understandings and knowledge with others.

## Recognition:

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- In April 2012, St. Anne received second place in the Canadian Education Association's (CEA) Ken Spencer Awards for Innovation in Teaching and Learning.
- Stirling McDowell Foundation project
- CTV and Global News clips



## Conclusion

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St. Anne Inquiry Based Learning Community has been a success for many reasons.

- The results show strong improvements in engagement and literacy levels. Over the five years reading levels have improved from 59 to 78 per cent of students at or above grade level.
- TTFM data from 2014 reveals 86% of students were engaged and motivated for learning compared to 61% of the Canadian norm. Boys were engaged and more significantly motivated 81% of the time compared to 59% as Canadian norm.
- Inquiry learning had promoted parent and community engagement.
- Inquiry learning fosters 21st-century skills of collaboration, problem solving, critical thinking skills and metacognitive self-reflection.
- Schools in GSCS have implemented inquiry learning into their school culture and use St Anne School as a resource for their journey.

*"I wondered how the kids are going to do when they get to the high school. What if they go to the high school and it isn't inquiry based? How are they going to survive and are they going to be able to cope? I think we are giving them the skills to adapt to an environment, more than a textbook would." —community volunteer*

Based on the success of our program we hope you agree that the St. Anne Inquiry-Based Learning Community is a worthy recipient of the 2015 Premier's Board of Education Award for Innovation and Excellence in Education.