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Growth Without Limits, Learning For All [Land-based Learning Program]

*2015 Premier's Board of Education Award for Innovation and
Excellence in Education*

Board Chair: Ken Arsenault

Director of Education: Randy Fox

Submitted September 30, 2015

From Board Policy 1020, Living Sky School Division No. 202 Board of Education:

Vision is a statement of our preferred future. It is a statement representative of the environment where students and staff flourish. It is what Living Sky School Division looks like when we live our beliefs.

The Vision Statement for Living Sky School Division No. 202 Board of Education is:

Growth Without Limits, Learning for All.

This submission for the Premier's Board of Education Award for Innovation and Excellence in Education is based upon the Board of Education for Living Sky School Division's belief that students and staff will indeed flourish in the right environment. With this in mind, the Board has sought out and supported initiatives, projects and programs conducive to growth and learning, and ultimately to the success of all its students. Although this has meant supporting a wide array of students from many different cultures, the focus of this submission is on programming for students of First Nations and Métis decent, particularly one program that has resulted in students indeed learning to flourish as students and young adults. This is not to say that one program makes the complete difference for students, and for this reason the Board continues to support multiple efforts to address the needs of First Nations and Métis students. Land-based Learning however, is a program that in many ways typifies the vision of the Board that the environment of Living Sky School Division be such that students and staff do indeed flourish.

Land-based Learning provides an opportunity for students to experience "Walking in Two Worlds". "Walking in Two Worlds" is the mission statement from the communities of Javier and Fort Chipewyan's experiential learning initiative. Staff members from Living Sky School Division had the opportunity to learn about Walking in Two Worlds" and "Two-Eyed Seeing" from Elders and other community members of Javier and Fort Chipewyan of the Yukon, and used this learning to develop the Land-based Learning program. Two-Eyed seeing refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the strengths of Western knowledge and ways of knowing and learning to use both these eyes together, for the benefit of all. In Land-based Learning, co-teaching takes place with the student learning as the Elder teaches side-by-side with an academic teacher. With this in mind, students achieve Saskatchewan curriculum outcomes while learning ways relative to First Nations and Métis culture, language and traditions through both teachers and Elders.

The Land-based Learning program provides this opportunity to Grade 9 and Grade 10 students in Leoville and Cando schools in Living Sky School Division. Approximately forty students attend the camp near Chitek Lake for one week (four days on actual camp, with several more days dedicated to travel and set up). During this time, students become engaged in their learning in ways that simply do not happen in the traditional classroom. Students learn respect for

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“Mother Earth” through the teachings of Elders. Students gain confidence in what they are capable of while learning to encourage and support others who may be of different heritage. Students of First Nations and Métis heritage learn about their own cultures and begin to truly understand their own culture, while others who may not have been knowledgeable about other cultures learn a respect for the beliefs of others.

Goals of the Program

The Land-based Learning program provides youth, community and educators with the opportunity to experience land-based learning using bicultural (First Nation and Métis culture, traditions and language; and academics) and co-teaching (Elder, traditional teacher and educator) models in Living Sky School Division. The program focuses on Grade 9 and 10 students. Its intended outcomes are as follows:

- Teach and practice local traditional language
- Meet Grade 9 and 10 Saskatchewan Learning Outcomes while learning on the land
- Build understanding between cultures
- Build relationships that will support youth in and out of school

Land-based Learning challenges students and teachers to reach beyond the normal ways of learning. Teachers must work with Elders to understand how curriculum may be taught on the land, and be both bi-cultural and inclusive of all students. In this regard, Elders are an integral part of the land-based learning experience, as they participate in the pre-teaching and planning days in the months prior to the camp itself. Through the pre-teaching and planning, Elders and teachers collaborate on how best to meet the intended outcomes of the camp. Through this process, teachers have the opportunity to learn the traditional teachings of the Elders while Elders learn about the curriculum and how its outcomes may fit within traditional teachings and learnings. This way, it is not only the students who benefit from land-based learning, but also our teachers and Elders, and although the actual camp is only four days in length, it provides learning that benefits students and staff for a lifetime.

Direct Board Influence and Participation

As noted earlier, the Board of Education for Living Sky School Division has always supported learning for all. The Board has made it clear to staff that learning for all means finding ways to see that students succeed in school. Regarding First Nations and Métis students, this has meant the Board showing leadership by publically acknowledging the First Nations and Métis heritage evident in its communities. Elders are regularly invited to participate and lead school division functions as a demonstration of the Board’s commitment to all students. The Board regularly accepts reports from staff regarding the well-being and achievement of its students. Its student achievement goals in reading, writing and math were in place several years prior to those of the provincial Education Sector Plan.

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The Board has been supportive of the formation of an Elders' Council. It meets with the Elders Council to discuss challenges and solutions for the education and social issues that face First Nations and Métis children, youth and families. It has supported "Shared Histories-Shared Hope" a week-long event, attended by thousands of its students as well as Elders, Board trustees and other community members, to help youth, regardless of heritage or culture, understand the effects of the residential school experience. Needless to say, the Board has allocated significant resources in support of its vision of *Growth Without Limits, Learning for All*. Its beliefs have not only led to supports for the well-being and achievement levels of its First Nations and Métis students, but have also influenced thinking and attitudes throughout the school division.

Specific to participation, the Board has always been part of significant events in the school division. The Board has been represented at the Land-based Learning camp to see firsthand its positive effect on students and staff. The Board has participated directly in ceremonies conducted in schools as the Treaty 6 document and the federal Letter of Apology regarding residential schools have been presented to students and staff in its schools. As noted above, the Board works with the school division Elders' Council, and in the case of Land-based Learning, listened to Elders as they spoke of the benefits of such a camp. This commitment the Board has shown to programs like Land-based Learning has demonstrated for all its commitment to all students. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the Board's involvement in this way has been to set a high standard regarding acceptance and respect of all people, regardless of their heritage, culture, or life circumstance.

Innovative Nature of the Program

Students have been participating in camping trips for many years in Saskatchewan. Such trips usually provide a positive experience for the students. In many cases, however, learning on typical camping trips is limited to such things as outdoor and canoeing skills. Although these are certainly important learnings for students, they do not match the significance of the learning that takes place in the Land-based Learning program. As has been mentioned, students achieve curriculum outcomes through the program. Use of modern technology is combined with the ancient teachings of Elders in this unique learning environment. Many of the students who participate in the Land-based Learning program are First Nations or Métis. Through authentic land-based learning, they gain a significant understanding of themselves as First Nations or Métis persons. They come to respect their own heritage in a way they never have before. Through the work of Elders and their teachers, students do indeed come to a true understanding of "Two-Eyed Seeing". This demonstrates itself in many ways such as a renewed respect for their own history and a new way of seeing the Elders who care so much for them. There comes a commitment to not only survive and succeed in the "Two Worlds" but to be leaders for positive change; to find ways to contribute successfully in the contemporary world while understanding ancient learnings and traditions. The authentic bi-cultural nature of the Land-based Learning camp is possibly its most innovative aspect. It provides the basis for understanding and growth for all students and staff involved. It provides an equitable opportunity for all students to grow, learn and flourish.

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Sustainability

Land-based Learning is something that has been happening in our world for thousands of years. In Saskatchewan, learning traditional ways through the land has been somewhat neglected this century, mostly as a result of the residential school experience. With the advent of such programs as this one, land-based learning has been renewed in some circles. Students, parents and Elders have expressed appreciation for this renewal. The Board of Education has heard this and, therefore, will continue to support the Land-based Learning program in Living Sky School Division. This program will not only sustain, but be enhanced and grow to include more students from more schools. Several other schools including Cut Knife High School, Spiritwood High School, and North Battleford Comprehensive High School will be part of this program moving forward. Board funds are annually targeted for the Land-based Learning program. Significant contributions from First Nations partner organizations presently support this program, and these organizations have assured Living Sky School Division that the support currently in place will continue.

Cost Related to Benefits Achieved

The Land-based Learning program has significant financial costs. Costs include those expenses related to many aspects, some as would be expected in any camp, such as food and shelter; with other costs related more to the unique nature of the experience such as for the assistance of individuals such as artists, traditional teachers and Elders. The first experience in 2013-14 was the most costly, approximately \$40,000, because it called for the purchasing of much of the equipment that is still in use today. Today, a one week camp costs approximately \$20,000. As mentioned earlier, approximately forty students participate in a one week camp. Although this may seem to be a significant cost per student, the long term benefits far outweigh the short term costs. The Land-based Learning program definitely contributes to successful school completion for students who otherwise would very likely not finish high school. It is known that First Nations youth who complete high school are likely to have life time earnings double those who do not complete high school. Students who have committed themselves to completing high school following this program have gone on to post-secondary education, ensuring a bright future for themselves. The costs of this program are minimal compared to its long term benefits.

Client Support

Students are the most significant client regarding the Land-based Learning program. Students, who participate in the planning and preparation of the program, come away feeling empowered to grow their own self-created limitations. Students learn to respect, encourage and support others regardless of their culture or heritage.

Parents are thankful that their children have the opportunity to learn about spiritual beliefs that have been lost. Parents learned that their children were indeed capable of living in a manner respectful of Mother Earth, as well of others. Parents are also appreciative of the concerted effort that is part of the program to build positive relationships between students and teachers.

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Elders are also very supportive of this program. They are pleased that students have the opportunity to learn more than academics, and that the traditional ways are important to the students as well as to staff and the Board of Education. Elders noted that students learn to live together with nature, and develop self-esteem and confidence through this learning. Also very significant is the expression of appreciation from Elders that they have had this opportunity to be part of teaching young people to improve their tomorrow.

The following two quotes help demonstrate how important Land-based Learning has become to our students and Elders. The first quote is from a female student and the second is from one of our Elders.

“We all have our own stories, that made us finish and we all have our own battles we had to defeat to get here tonight. For me, I never really had a stable home. My mother died when I was 10 years old and my father was never really there for me. Thankfully, I had a cousin who is more like an older sister or a mother, who opened her home to my brother and I. Because of Nicole, I had somewhere to call a home but what I really wanted was my mom and my dad. And I thought that it was easier to party and drink than it is to be sad and lonely. I was always afraid to be alone but last year I discovered I was stronger than I thought. I travelled to Old Crow in the Arctic Circle and while I was there I found a part of me I didn't know had – I was strong, I was happy being sober, I was relieved not to have any drama and I wasn't afraid of being alone anymore. I used this new side of me to stay focused on my goal and graduate.”

“I know these students will remember this camp forever, they'll always smile and talk about it. They will encourage their younger acquaintances in younger grades to take up this opportunity when the time comes. The kids that complained the most, were the same ones who didn't want to leave. I really hope that this camp stays, our students need something like this as much as possible. I won't say it's a privilege; it's more than that... It's an opportunity. They each encouraged each other to keep going. It wasn't a single student camp, we all became family. This camp was our classroom, endless possibilities and growing knowledge. There's many students out there that wish to have a camp like this, and someday they will. I have a great feeling this camp isn't numbered. You can't number learning, you never stop learning - learning is forever, and I know this camp will be too.”

Partnerships

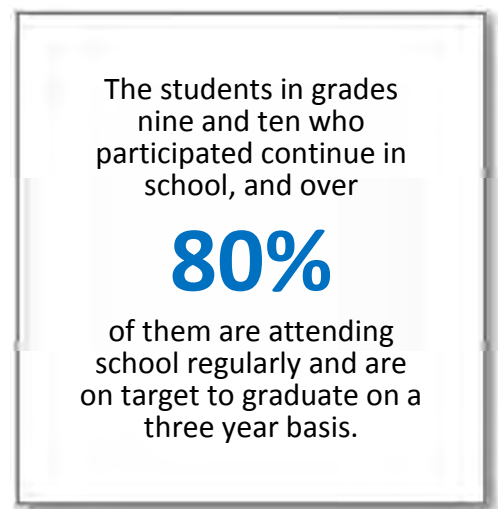
A number of partners support Land-based Learning in Living Sky School Division. Battleford Agency Tribal Chiefs contributes a grant of approximately \$10,000 per year. Obviously this financial support is important, but so is the general support those organizing the program receive for their efforts. Our First Nations partners are very important to us, and so the approval and words of support we receive matter a great deal. SaskTel is also a partner in Land-based Learning. Although its financial support is less than half of what is received from BATC,

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the support is still appreciated and valued. Our Elders' Council is also a key partner. Elders assist with design of the experience, and a number of them attend the camp, working alongside teachers and students providing the "Two-Eyed Seeing" experience mentioned earlier. Much of our support originally came from Elders from Old Crow, in the Yukon, the site of the first Land-based Learning experience. Elders and other community members have mentored our teachers as well as our students on Land-based Learning, and provided that very important initial support for this program.

Improved Student Achievement

Although our Land-based Learning program is relatively new, there are already positive results, especially when one considers our number of students graduating from Cando School. Cando School is almost 100% First Nations and Métis students. Graduation rates, especially three year rates have traditionally ranked below that of the province. We have seen a change, however, for those students who participated in Land-based Learning. From the first experience at Old Crow, seventeen students attended and fifteen of those students graduated. The two who did not graduate left the community prior to graduation. Since that first group, the students in grades nine and ten who participated continue in school, and over 80% of them are attending school regularly and are on target to graduate on a three year basis. We have also seen, through surveys conducted, a significant change in students' attitudes, with students who attend Land-based Learning ranking themselves high in the areas of commitment to Learning in School, Self-Concept, Empowerment, Cultural Sensitivity and Self-Control. Although these are not necessarily "student achievement" indicators, they do tell us that more than ever before students are feeling hopeful about their futures, something we believe is needed if they are going to succeed in school and in life following high school.



Conclusion

The Board of Education for Living Sky School Division would like to express its gratitude to the Saskatchewan School Boards Association for being considered for the Premier's Board of Education Award for Innovation and Excellence in Education. Land-based Learning is making a huge difference for students of Living Sky School Division. The program is nothing less than innovative in nature and certainly represents excellence in education. Innovative programs find ways and means to connect students to their own learning. Innovative programs, especially where First Nations and Métis students are concerned, not only support academic learning but include opportunities for students to reach beyond how they have seen themselves in the past to now see themselves as not only high school students attending school for a purpose, but as young men and women who see a brighter future for themselves and for their communities.

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Who We Are

Living Sky School Division is governed by a ten-member elected Board of Education. The Division's Operational Plan set by the Board of Education provides overall direction for everything the Division does and serves as an anchor to ensure that all Division planning processes are in alignment.

Our programs reflect the diverse needs of our student population. Schools include elementary, high schools, PreK-12 schools and alternate schools. Unique programs include technical-vocational programs, advanced placement International Baccalaureate Program, alternate programs, a variety of Practical and Applied Arts programs, Arts Education courses which include visual arts, dance, drama, music and band and Land-based Learning program.

Vision Statement

Growth Without Limits, Learning For All

It is a statement that represents an environment where staff and students flourish. It is what the Living Sky School Division looks like when we follow our belief system.

Mission Statement

Shaping Our Future Through Thoughtful Schools

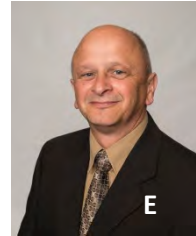
Thoughtful schools are schools where students and staff focus on:

- commitment to academic learning
- learning to respect people and property
- learning to become full contributing members of society
- learning to celebrate success



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