

Chapter 8

Living Sky School Division No. 202—Engaging Grades 7 to 12 Students

1.0 MAIN POINTS

Saskatchewan’s education sector set provincial targets associated with student engagement as measured by the *OurSCHOOL*¹ survey. The sector aims to have, by June 2018, 77% of students actively engaged in learning and have a positive sense of belonging.

Living Sky School Division No. 202 is responsible for educating approximately 5,700 students in the area surrounding North Battleford, Unity, and Spiritwood. Almost half of its students are in Grades 7 to 12.

Other than the following areas, Living Sky had effective processes to engage Grades 7 to 12 students. To improve student engagement, it needs to:

- › Analyze current year *OurSCHOOL* survey results as compared to prior years—the past two years of survey results highlight areas of strength and those requiring additional attention (i.e., having a positive sense of belonging, positive relationships, positive homework behaviour, level of anxiety, level of depression)
- › Obtain input of its Elders’ Council on actual survey results specific to First Nations and Métis students to help them address the disparity in results between self-identified First Nations and Métis students and other students—almost one-third of its Grades 7 to 12 students are of First Nations and Métis ancestry

These steps will help the Division develop clear and timely action plans to improve student engagement, establish interim targets to help it move towards achieving the provincial target for student engagement, and focus its initiatives on areas critical to better engaging students.

Student engagement contributes positively to students’ academic achievement and well-being. Student engagement tends to decline as students progress through middle and secondary school (i.e., Grades 7 to 12). Students that are not sufficiently engaged in school are at an increased risk of not graduating, which may negatively impact future employment opportunities for these students.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Student engagement is the extent to which students identify with and value schooling outcomes, have a sense of belonging at school, participate in academic and non-academic activities, strive to meet formal requirements of schooling, and make a serious personal investment in learning.²

¹ The *OurSCHOOL* survey was previously known as the *Tell Them From Me* survey.

² Willms, J. D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P., *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*, (2009), p. 7.



The education sector recognizes that student engagement plays a key role in student success and achievement. *The Education Act, 1995 (Act)* assigns boards of education (school boards) responsibility for administration and management of schools, with oversight from the Ministry of Education. The Act makes school boards responsible for exercising general supervision and control over the schools in their school division. In addition, it establishes the duties of students relating to student engagement, such as attending school regularly and being diligent in their studies.

2.1 Student Engagement—a Provincial Priority

The *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth – Vision 2020 and Beyond*, released in 2012, includes the following two education-related goals:

- › To lead the country in Grade 12 graduation rates by 2020
- › To reduce the difference in graduation rates between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students by 50% by 2020³

The Education Sector Strategic Plan (ESSP) is a sector-wide plan for Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 12, which includes priorities that reflect a commitment to achieving the targets set out in the *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth*.⁴ It includes the following two sector goals:

- › Saskatchewan will achieve an 85% three-year graduation rate by June 30, 2020⁵
- › To increase graduation rates among First Nations and Métis students from 35% to at least 65%⁶

Improving student engagement is key to achieving these ESSP sector goals. To help school divisions monitor student engagement, the Ministry makes available and expects Saskatchewan school divisions to annually administer a survey called the *OurSCHOOL* survey (survey).

School divisions separately administer this survey to students in Grades 4 to 6 (elementary) and in Grades 7 to 12 (middle/secondary). The survey is designed to collect information on students' sense of belonging, intellectual engagement, and positive relationships (i.e., measures of student engagement).⁷ An external consultant contracted by the Ministry developed the survey and facilitates its use.

To increase graduation rates in the province, the ESSP identifies the following strategies:

- › By June 2018, school divisions will achieve parity between First Nations and Métis students and non-First Nations and Métis students on the *OurSCHOOL* engagement measures⁸

³ Government of Saskatchewan, *Saskatchewan Plan for Growth: Vision 2020 and Beyond*, (2012). pp. 4–5.

⁴ *Ministry of Education Plan for 2016-17*, p. 3.

⁵ Students graduating within three years of entering Grade 10.

⁶ *Ministry of Education Plan for 2016-17*, pp. 5-6.

⁷ *Ministry of Education Annual Report for 2015-16*, pp. 12, 14.

⁸ *Ministry of Education Plan for 2016-17*, p. 5.

- By June 2018, 77% of students participating in the *OurSCHOOL* survey will report that they are actively engaged in their learning and have a positive sense of belonging in their school community⁹

2.2 Student Engagement Contributes to Student Achievement

Student engagement contributes positively to students' academic achievement and well-being. It is measured using the following three dimensions:

- Social engagement:** a sense of belonging and participation in school life
- Institutional engagement** (also referred to as academic engagement): participation in the formal requirements of schooling
- Intellectual engagement:** an emotional and cognitive investment in learning, using higher-order thinking skills (such as analysis and evaluation) to increase understanding, solve complex problems, or construct new knowledge¹⁰

Research shows that all three dimensions of student engagement markedly decline as students progress through middle and secondary school (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1 – Percentage of Engaged Students, By Type of Engagement and Type of School

Type of School	Participation (Social Engagement)	Sense of Belonging (Social Engagement)	Attendance (Institutional Engagement)	Intellectual Engagement
Elementary ^A	79%	74%	91%	62%
Middle ^B	73%	70%	81%	44%
Middle-Secondary ^C	69%	66%	63%	35%
Secondary ^D	61%	71%	58%	30%

Source: Willms, J. D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P., *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*, (2009), p. 23.

^A A school where the highest grade is 6 or lower.

^B A school where the lowest grade is either 5, 6, or 7, and the highest is 7, 8, or 9.

^C A school that includes a grade below 8 and a grade above 9.

^D A school where the lowest grade is 8 or higher, and the highest grade is 10 or higher.

Disengaged students are at a higher risk of falling behind and may drop out of school.¹¹ Students that are not sufficiently engaged in school may not graduate, which in turn may negatively impact future employment opportunities for these students.

Students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and students from ethnic minorities and First Nations and Métis communities disproportionately experience disengagement from school. Disengagement has also been linked to school violence and social exclusion.¹²

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Willms, J. D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P., *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*, (2009), p. 7.

¹¹ http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2013/07/pittsburgh--a_student_who_show.html (23 November 2016).

¹² Willms, J. D., Friesen, S. & Milton, P., *What did you do in school today? Transforming classrooms through social, academic, and intellectual engagement*, (2009), p. 7.



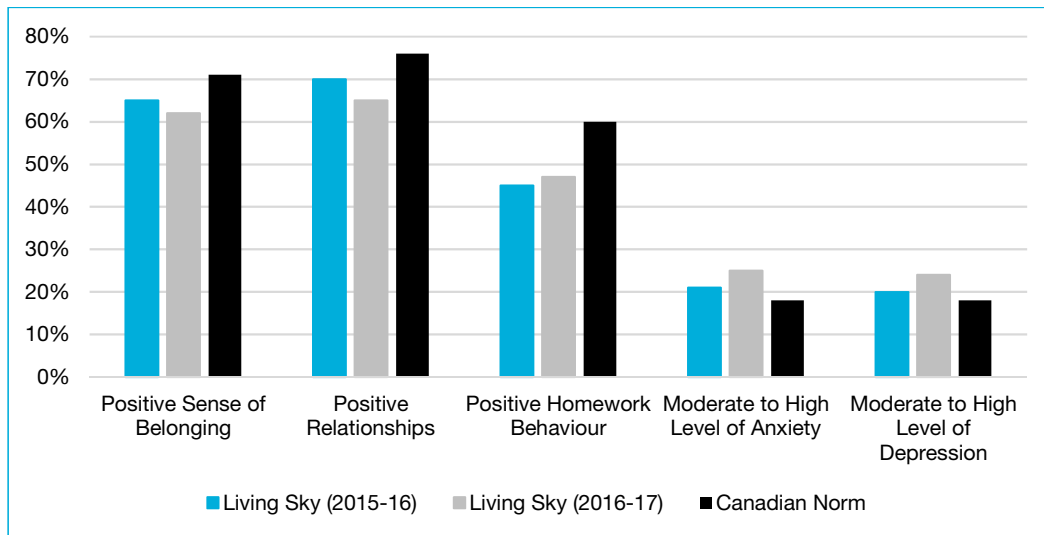
2.3 Student Engagement at Living Sky School Division

Living Sky is a primarily rural school division located in northwest Saskatchewan. The Division has approximately 5,700 students, and operates 24 schools in 14 communities.¹³ It includes the communities of North Battleford, Unity, Spiritwood, and surrounding areas. At September 30, 2016, almost one-third of the Division’s students had self-identified as First Nations and Métis.

Also, at September 2016, just under one-half of its students were in Grades 7 to 12 at 16 schools. At June 30, 2016, the Division’s overall student graduation rate was 72%. Its First Nation and Métis student graduation rate was 32% for the same period.¹⁴

Living Sky identifies student engagement as an area of focus for student learning and achievement in its Operational Plan for 2015-16 to 2017-18. As illustrated in **Figure 2**, the Division’s Grades 7 to 12 survey results over the past two years identified key areas where its students’ engagement was worse than the Canadian norm (i.e., positive sense of belonging, positive relationships, positive homework behaviour, level of anxiety, level of depression).

Figure 2—Living Sky’s 2015-16 and 2016-17 OurSCHOOL Engagement Indicators for Grades 7 to 12 Worse than the Canadian Norm^A



Source: Adapted from Living Sky’s OurSCHOOL survey results.

^A The results for 2015-16 include data from surveys completed in fall 2015 and spring 2016, while the results for 2016-17 include data from the fall 2016 survey only.

3.0 AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE, CRITERIA, AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this audit was to assess the effectiveness of Living Sky’s processes, for the 12-month period ended January 31, 2017, to engage Grades 7 to 12 students.

We examined Division and school documentation related to engaging students (e.g., plans, initiatives, reports), and relevant Ministry and sector-wide guidance. We interviewed staff at Living Sky’s Division Office, as well as principals and teachers at five

¹³ Adapted from Living Sky School Division No. 202’s annual reports for 2014-15 and 2015-16.

¹⁴ Adapted from information provided by Living Sky.

schools with students in Grades 7 to 12 (schools). We also tested a sample of student engagement initiatives in the Division.

To conduct this audit, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook – Assurance*. To evaluate Living Sky’s processes, we used criteria based on our related work, reviews of literature including reports of other auditors, and consultations with management. Living Sky’s management agreed with the criteria (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3—Audit Criteria

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|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Measure student engagement <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.1 Identify assessment tools 1.2 Conduct assessment 1.3 Evaluate assessment results to identify areas of improvement 1.4 Communicate assessment results to stakeholders (e.g., teachers, administrators, students, parents, communities, First Nations) 2. Implement key initiatives <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 2.1 Identify student engagement initiatives in response to assessment results 2.2 Carry out initiatives 2.3 Manage barriers to student engagement 3. Monitor overall effectiveness of initiatives <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3.1 Assess key success factors of initiatives (e.g., indicators) 3.2 Measure results 3.3 Adjust initiatives as required 3.4 Report on results |
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We concluded that for the 12-month period ended January 31, 2017, Living Sky School Division No. 202 had, except in the following areas, effective processes to engage Grade 7 to 12 students.

The Division needs to analyze the current year OurSCHOOL survey results as compared to prior years. It also needs to obtain input of its Elders’ Council on actual survey results specific to First Nations and Métis students. These steps will help the Division develop clear and timely action plans to improve student engagement, establish interim targets to help it move towards achieving the provincial target for student engagement, and focus its initiatives on areas critical to better engaging students.

4.0 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this section, we describe our key findings and recommendations related to the audit criteria in **Figure 3**.



4.1 Need to Improve Analysis and Response to Survey Results

4.1.1 *OurSCHOOL* Survey Administered Consistent with Ministry Requirements

As the Ministry requires, the Division administers the *OurSCHOOL* survey at each of its schools annually.

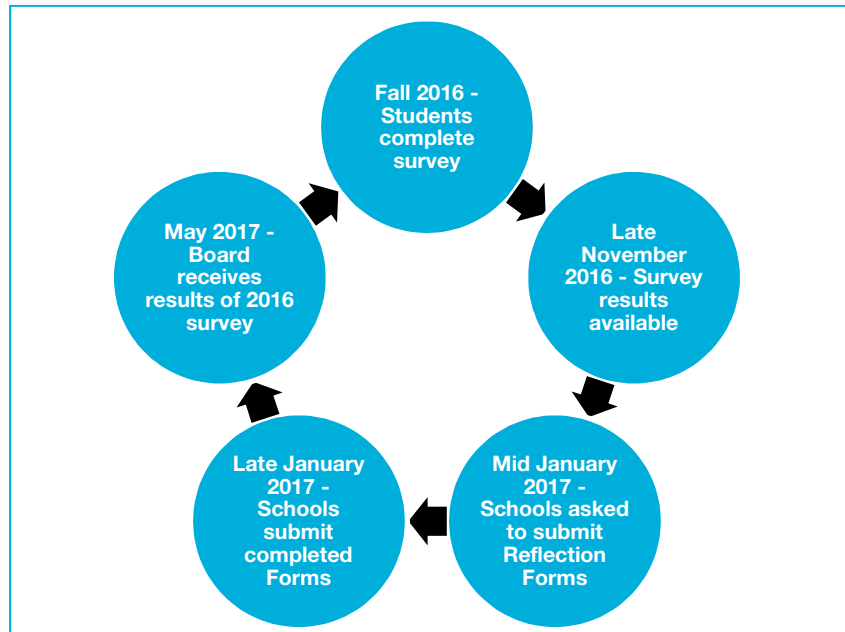
The Ministry requires provincially funded schools to conduct the survey at least annually. As noted in **Section 2.1**, the Ministry, through its external consultant, facilitates the use of the survey by all school divisions in the province.

The Division and its staff can access, through the internet, survey training materials, such as webinars and manuals. These materials can assist them in administering the survey and responding to its results. For example, they include an action plan template. The template is designed to document planned actions, assign specific tasks to individuals (along with timelines), and establish criteria to assess success (i.e., targets). Also, the template suggests schools select two or three areas for improvement (i.e., do not take on more than is manageable).

The Ministry gave the Division direction on administering the survey, including identifying mandatory survey questions (e.g., addressing sense of belonging, truancy, effort). The Ministry recommended a survey time of one class period to limit the risk of student fatigue when completing the survey. It allowed divisions to include other standard questions available within the survey tool (e.g., addressing drug use, physical activity, participation in sports or clubs).

In addition, the Division gave its schools an opportunity to add a few questions to the survey—up to two multiple-choice questions, and two open-ended questions. It asked schools to administer the survey by a specified date (e.g., by October 28, 2016, for the 2016-17 fall survey). See **Figure 4** for the typical *OurSCHOOL* survey cycle at Living Sky.

The Ministry's external consultant makes the survey results electronically available to the Division and its schools about two days after the survey is completed by all schools within the Division. Results are compared to the Canadian norm for the Division overall, by each school, and for self-identified First Nations and Métis students and others.

Figure 4—Typical *OurSCHOOL* Survey Administration and Reporting Cycle for Living Sky

Source: Developed from Living Sky's records.

For all five Grades 7 to 12 schools we visited, their surveys included all mandatory questions, along with additional questions added by the Division and school.

For the 2015-16 school year, all of the Division's Grades 7 to 12 schools completed the survey in the fall (i.e., between October to November), with a few schools conducting the survey again in the spring (i.e., between April to May).

For the 2016-17 school year, almost all Grades 7 to 12 schools completed the survey in fall 2016—one school requested to complete the survey in spring 2017 to give students time to establish themselves in the school (e.g., building relationships, joining clubs/sports) before completing the survey. They each administered the survey within the timeframe approved by the Division.

4.1.2 Lack of Timely Action Plans

Living Sky's schools develop action plans to improve student engagement in the second half of the school year. Developing plans in January reduces the time available in the school year to implement them.

The senior management team (i.e., Director of Education, superintendents) indicated that they discuss areas of concern noted from their review of the Division's overall results. Superintendents also indicated they discussed the survey results with the principals of their assigned schools. For the schools we visited, principals and teachers indicated that they discussed the survey results for their school. They do not document their review of the results.

The Division requires schools to complete and submit a survey reflection form. This form requires schools to document any celebrations or surprises (e.g., results better than expected, improvements) that school staff identified in their survey results. The form also asks schools to document how the school shared the survey results (i.e., meetings with



staff, students, and parents), and how the school planned to respond to the results. The Division did not require schools to submit the reflection forms until halfway through the school year (i.e., February in 2016 and January in 2017).

For the five schools we visited, the schools did not effectively set out clear responses to the survey results in the reflection forms. For example, the schools' responses on the forms did not set out specific actions to identify the underlying causes of the results, or to address those causes. Also, the schools' responses did not include specific timeframes for actions.

As described in **Section 4.1.1**, the Ministry provided school divisions with materials to assist them in administering and responding to the survey results, including an action plan template. We found that the Division had not reviewed these materials and did not use them to develop action plans.

Development of action plans in response to the survey results earlier in the school year (e.g., in November or December) would help the Division and its schools improve student engagement. Developing plans earlier in the school year would give schools more opportunity to implement initiatives thereby increasing student engagement in the school year. Timely action plans would also increase the value of the survey for those schools deciding to conduct the survey twice per year, as the second survey could provide feedback on the success of schools' plans.

1. We recommend that Living Sky School Division No. 202 require its schools to develop clear and timely action plans in response to the OurSCHOOL survey results.

4.1.3 Interim Targets Not Established

The Division had not set interim targets for student engagement to help it work towards achieving the provincial targets. The Division was working towards achieving the provincial target described in **Section 2.1** (i.e., that 77% of students are actively engaged in learning and have a positive sense of belonging as reported by the survey).

Of the five schools we visited, one had established targets specific to student engagement (e.g., 90% of students participating in school clubs, events, and/or other activities). In addition, the Division established targets associated with the survey for the Invitational Shared Services Initiative¹⁵ at one of its schools. See **Figure 6** for further information about this initiative. However, neither the Division nor its other schools established any other targets to focus on improving student engagement.

Establishment of targets associated with student engagement survey results would help emphasize the importance of student engagement. Targets would be useful when analyzing survey results, and assist in measuring progress towards the provincial student engagement goals and strategies (see **Section 2.1**).

¹⁵ Invitational Shared Services Initiative partnerships form part of the Government's ongoing commitment to improving education outcomes for First Nations and Métis students, as outlined in both the Saskatchewan Plan for Growth and the Education Sector Strategic Plan. These partnerships bring together the provincial education system and First Nations education organizations to provide students and teachers living on-reserve with the same supports available in provincial schools, such as speech language pathologists, community liaisons, and literacy and graduation coaches.

2. We recommend that Living Sky School Division No. 202 and its schools establish interim targets related to the OurSCHOOL survey.

4.1.4 Further Analysis of Survey Results Needed

While Living Sky uses the survey as its primary tool to measure student engagement, it does not perform year-over-year analysis to help create action plans.

We found that neither the Division nor its schools analyzed the survey results as compared to the prior year. Analysis of survey results from one year to the next, at both a Division- and school-level, would highlight those areas where the Division made progress or those areas needing further attention.

Analysis at the school-level would highlight successful student engagement initiatives and those initiatives not achieving the desired outcomes. This would help schools in focusing their resources on initiatives that are making a difference in student engagement and reduce potential for initiative overload.

3. We recommend that Living Sky School Division No. 202 and its schools analyze the year-over-year OurSCHOOL survey results to inform survey action plans.

4.1.5 Input on Specific Survey Results Not Obtained from Elders' Council

The Division shares and discusses results with key partners but needs to do more to obtain the input of its Elders' Council (Council).

The Council provides the Division with a connection to local First Nations and Métis communities. The Council has a common interest of improving graduation rates for First Nation and Métis students.

Living Sky and its schools use varying means to share survey results with the Board of Education (Board), Ministry, parents, and the public. Principals share survey results with teachers during staff meetings, and with students and parents through newsletters or school community councils.¹⁶ The Board receives the results of the past fall survey annually in the spring. While the Division generally discusses the survey results with its Elders' Council, it does not share specific results with them.¹⁷

Almost one-third of Living Sky's Grade 7-12 students are of First Nations and Métis ancestry.¹⁸ As **Figure 5** illustrates, recent survey results show a disparity between self-

¹⁶ School Community Councils (SCCs) are required for each school according to section 140.1 of the Act. According to the Division's website, SCCs are made up of parents, community members, staff members, and students. SCCs work with schools to support the learning success and well-being of all children and youth. Councils encourage and facilitate parent, community and youth engagement in school planning and the school improvement process.

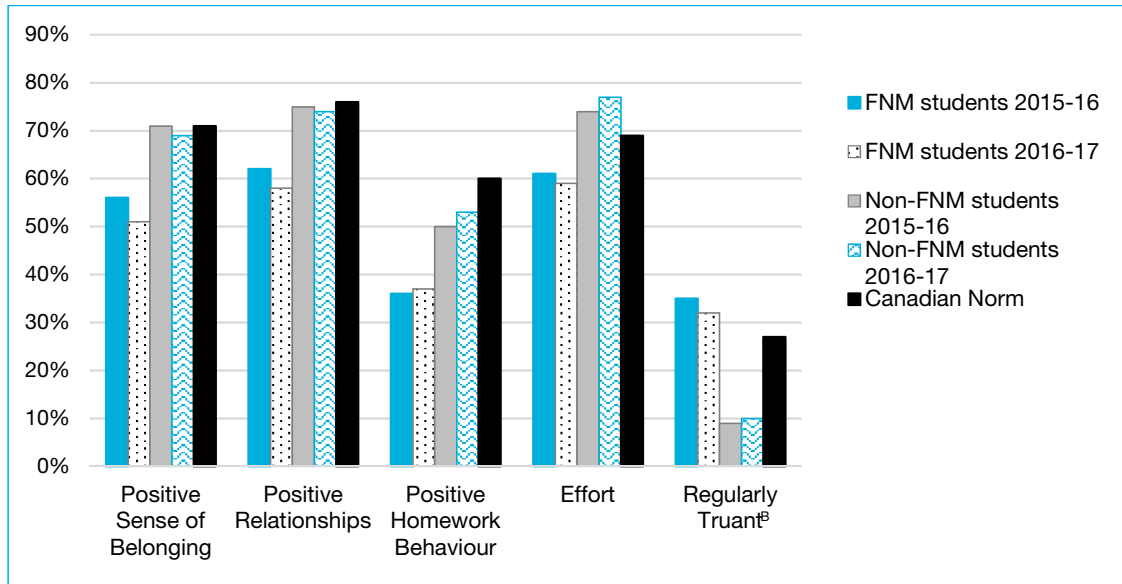
¹⁷ The role of the Elders' Council is to advise the Board of Education on matters related to First Nations and Métis education policy development and implementation.

¹⁸ *Living Sky School Division No. 202 Annual Report 2015-16*, p. 29.



identified First Nations and Métis students as compared to non-First Nations and Métis students (e.g., positive sense of belonging, positive relationships, positive homework behaviour, effort, and truancy).

Figure 5—Comparison of Living Sky’s 2015-16 and 2016-17 OurSCHOOL Survey Results for First Nations and Métis and Non-First Nations and Métis Students^A



Source: Adapted from Living Sky’s *OurSCHOOL* survey results.

^A The results for 2015-16 include data from surveys completed in fall 2015 and spring 2016, while the results for 2016-17 include data from the fall 2016 survey only.

^B Truant students are absent from school without leave or explanation.

Sharing survey results specific for First Nations and Métis students with the Council would enable the Division to seek its feedback and insights. This could lead to potential solutions on bridging the gap and better engaging First Nations and Métis students, families, and communities, with the goal of improving graduation rates. Communicating the specific survey results to the Council would enable the Division to use their input when developing the Division’s response to the survey results, further engaging First Nations and Métis students.

4. We recommend that Living Sky School Division No. 202 obtain the input of its Elders’ Council on the OurSCHOOL survey results specific to First Nations and Métis students.

4.2 Key Initiatives Implemented

4.2.1 Most Initiatives Informally Implemented

Living Sky informally considers the feasibility of student engagement initiatives, along with required training, prior to implementing initiatives. Superintendents and principals are in regular contact regarding school activities and initiatives.

The Division gives each school the authority to identify and implement initiatives to promote student engagement. As such, schools developed the majority of Living Sky's student engagement initiatives. For example, the five Grades 7-12 schools we visited had numerous sports teams and extra-curricular clubs to engage students in school (e.g., basketball, curling, robotics, drama) in addition to initiatives set out in **Figure 6**.

Figure 6—Student Engagement Initiatives Observed at Living Sky Grades 7 to 12 Schools

First Nations/Métis Graduation & Achievement Team – A Division-level initiative to promote engagement and attendance of First Nation and Métis students. The team meets regularly to discuss barriers to student attendance and learning, and ways to address them.

Dynamic Data-Driven Decisions (D4) Initiative – A Division-led pilot project to support schools in making greater use of data in making decisions, setting goals, and evaluating programs. Its focus is to engage the greater school community in a common achievement goal (e.g., reading). Eleven schools participate in this initiative.

Mental Health First Aid – This Division-led initiative provides education about mental health problems (e.g., substance use disorders, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, psychotic disorders), recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health problems, and providing crisis first aid. Six schools participate in this initiative.

Treaty Education – A Kindergarten to Grade 12 curriculum to educate students on the treaties. It includes professional development around Treaty education to increase teachers' knowledge of Indigenous people, culture and history, and to help teachers better engage with First Nations and Métis students.

Evaluations of Year 1 & 2 Teachers – Superintendents formally evaluate new teachers. The evaluation includes assessing their ability to engage students.

Professional Learning Communities – Groups of teachers meet regularly to share expertise and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students.

Invitational Shared Services Initiative (ISSI) – This Division-led initiative established a partnership between Living Sky and two local Tribal Councils. It has a goal of ensuring enrolment, engagement, attendance, and graduation rates for First Nations and Métis students at one of the Division's high schools are at the same rates as their non-Aboriginal counterparts. The initiative created a graduation coach at North Battleford Comprehensive High School. The graduation coach mentors First Nations and Métis students and advocates for them. The coach helps bridge relationships between teachers and students. The graduation coach also operates a classroom at the high school (referred to as the Gateway to Success classroom). This classroom provides a safe space for First Nations and Métis students to seek help with assignments and homework (i.e., tutoring).

Following Their Voices – A provincially funded initiative to raise the educational achievement and participation of First Nations and Métis students at one school in the Division—Cando Community School. It focuses on enhancing relationships between students and teachers, and creating safe, well-managed learning environments for students.

Land-Based Learning – A four-day land-based learning camp at three schools in the Division—Cando Community School, Leoville Central School, and Spiritwood High School. The camp incorporates First Nations' culture, traditions, and language with academics using a co-teaching model (elders, teachers).

Activate Program – One school—Unity Comprehensive High School—promotes kindness and belonging among students through interactive projects.

Student/Classroom Libraries – One school—Macklin School—purchased books based on student suggestions with the goal of making reading interesting for them.

Positive School Climate Committee – At one school—Unity Comprehensive High School—students, teachers, and parents organize activities and events to promote a positive school environment, such as random acts of kindness.

Extra-Curricular Shuttle Program – One school—North Battleford Comprehensive High School—provides transportation for First Nations and Métis students living on-reserve to attend extra-curricular activities outside of school hours (i.e., after school, on weekends).

Source: Compiled from Living Sky records and interviews.

Also as shown in **Figure 6**, Living Sky identified a few larger initiatives at a Division-level. We found the Division either implemented these initiatives as pilot projects at some



schools (e.g., D4 initiative, ISSI, Mental Health First Aid program), or at a Division-level for all schools (e.g., First Nations/Métis Graduation and Achievement Team, Treaty Education, evaluation of Year 1 and Year 2 teachers).

The Division and its schools informally assessed the feasibility of student engagement initiatives. Division superintendents held regular discussions with principals to discuss the feasibility of initiatives and monitor school activities and programs. For initiatives that Living Sky implemented at multiple schools, or those initiatives requiring specific funding, we found that the Division conducted a more formal feasibility analysis (e.g., determined need for external funding).

For initiatives requiring training (e.g., Treaty Education, D4 initiative, Mental Health First Aid program), Living Sky provided staff with necessary training, often through professional development days. We observed training materials (e.g., presentations, course agendas) for these initiatives to confirm that training occurred.

For ten initiatives at the five schools we visited, the Division and/or the schools informally assigned responsibilities at the Division- and school-level. Informal assignment of responsibility seems reasonable given the regular communications between superintendents and principals.

4.2.2 Most but Not All Initiatives Relate to Areas of Need— Potential Initiative Overload Exists

For the most part, initiatives underway in the Division's Grades 7 to 12 schools related to areas where the Division's survey results were worse than the Canadian norm. However, school officials express concern about initiative overload.

The Division does not have a formal process to create or stop initiatives. Initiatives are either Division-led or school-led (see **Figure 6**). Schools can identify and implement initiatives to promote student engagement without Division office approval. Some initiatives started at a school may be adopted by other schools or across the entire Division.

The Division recognizes that its First Nations and Métis students have lower success rates and on-time graduation rates when compared to the provincial average.¹⁹ This gap is also reflected in the survey results (see **Figure 5**). To address this gap, the Division:

- › Developed a 2016-17 plan to improve the achievement of its First Nations and Métis students. The plan identifies outcomes for these students' achievement, barriers to achieving those outcomes, and actions to address those barriers
- › Developed an action plan in response to the ESSP goals and strategies, specific to First Nations and Métis achievement and graduation rates
- › Discussed barriers to First Nations and Métis student engagement as part of the First Nation/Métis Graduation and Achievement Team (as described in **Figure 6**)

¹⁹ Living Sky School Division No. 202 PowerPoint presentation titled *Public Consultation For Strategic Plan Renewal and Development*.

- › Implemented specific initiatives aimed at improving engagement and achievement for First Nations and Métis students (e.g., ISSI, Following Their Voices, Land-Based Learning as described in **Figure 6**)
- › Created an Elders' Council with local First Nations (as described in **Section 4.1.5**).

The survey results in **Figure 2** also reflect the Division is worse than the Canadian norm for student anxiety and depression. The Division acknowledged this and implemented the Mental Health First Aid program (as described in **Figure 6**).

For five Grades 7-12 schools we visited, initiatives at each school varied with all schools having multiple initiatives to promote student engagement. **Figure 6** summarizes some of the student engagement initiatives we observed.

To optimize the Division's resources, initiatives to promote student engagement should primarily focus on specific areas where the student engagement is worse than the Canadian norm.

As **Figure 2** illustrates for the 2015-16 and 2016-17 survey results, Grades 7-12 students in Living Sky are worse than the Canadian norm for the following three engagement indicators—having a positive sense of belonging, positive relationships, and positive homework behaviour. Also, more Division students are experiencing moderate to high levels of anxiety and depression as compared to the Canadian norm.

We compared Living Sky's student engagement initiatives to the Division's survey results.

We found the Division had various initiatives (e.g., positive school climate committee, mental health first aid) designed to address those areas where it was worse than the Canadian norm. We noted the Division had identified the need for a student attendance strategy. It had identified this need as part of its recent strategic planning process. It planned to develop such a strategy after its strategic plan was finalized in the spring of 2017.

In addition, we noted many initiatives that did not specifically relate to areas where the Division was worse than the Canadian norm. Some Division staff cited concerns about the number of initiatives underway at schools noting they often feel stretched.

While using multiple initiatives to promote student engagement can help engage a broader base of students, the Division must safeguard against initiative overload. It must achieve a balance between the number of initiatives and resources available (e.g., teacher time). Initiative overload can create a situation where those involved do not have sufficient time to do their job well. This increases the risk that well-intended initiatives may not be successful.

Having action plans that focus on areas needing improvement, and deliberately considering initiatives no longer needed, can help overcome initiative overload. In **Section 4.1.2**, we recommend that the Division require its schools to develop clear and timely action plans in response to the survey results.



4.3 Additional Analysis to Monitor Effectiveness of Initiatives Needed

4.3.1 Most Initiatives Informally Monitored and Adjusted

While Living Sky used the OurSCHOOL survey results, student achievement results, and graduation rates to assess its overall success in engaging students, it informally assessed, monitored, and adjusted its various initiatives.

The ESSP has goals for student achievement and graduation rates. Instead of creating separate mechanisms to monitor initiatives, the Division appropriately monitored the completion of actions taken to contribute towards the ESSP goals. The Division also assessed student achievement results semi-annually and superintendents informally monitored students' grades at the end of each semester.

The Division formally assessed the effectiveness of only a few larger Division-led initiatives. For example, in 2015-16, the Division assessed whether the D4 initiative had a positive impact on student achievement scores. Also, as part of the ISSI initiative, the Division tracked various information about First Nations and Métis student engagement (e.g., credit attainment required for successful graduation, attendance).

For the five Grades 7 to 12 schools we visited, a few schools tracked the success of specific student engagement initiatives. For example, the school with the graduation coach program tracked monthly students' use of the Gateway to Success classroom part of the ISSI initiative (see **Figure 6**). Another high school that strived to have 90% of its students engaged in at least one school activity (e.g., sports, clubs, events, etc.) tracked which students were involved in one or more school activities.

However, most schools informally evaluated and adjusted their initiatives. They primarily used verbal feedback from various groups (e.g., students, teachers, parents). A few schools surveyed students to obtain feedback. We did not find documented evidence to support that the schools adjusted their initiatives based on feedback. Additional analysis of changes in student engagement would better inform evaluations and decisions on initiatives.

In **Section 4.1**, we recommend that Living Sky formally analyze, at a Division- and school-level, the *OurSCHOOL* survey results. Also, we recommend that the Division and its schools establish interim targets and develop clear and timely action plans in response to the *OurSCHOOL* survey results. Development of interim targets and action plans would assist the Division and its schools to focus on where adjustments to initiatives are necessary.

In 2016-17, the Division introduced a feedback tool to assist in collecting information from the public regarding what the Division is doing well and what it can improve. The Division plans to use this feedback to inform its current strategic planning process. The information Living Sky collects through this tool may also be useful when considering adjustments to student engagement initiatives.

4.3.2 Results of Student Engagement Initiatives Reported but with Limited Analysis

Living Sky and its schools use varying means to report the results of student engagement initiatives to the Board of Education, Ministry, parents, and the public. This includes:

- › Sharing student achievement results with the Board annually
- › Making ISSI presentations to the Elders' Council and Board
- › Providing the Ministry with periodic ISSI progress reports
- › Providing the Board with an annual update regarding progress on ESSP targets
- › Providing Board members with access to the ESSP targets, action plans, and related data by posting information on the boardroom walls
- › Communicating with students and parents through school newsletters and information posted throughout schools (e.g., on bulletin boards)
- › Providing monthly attendance reports to the Ministry
- › Describing key student engagement initiatives in the Division's public annual report

The Division analyzed some of the student engagement-related results. For example, the Division analyzed changes in student attendance and identified reasons for declines in attendance throughout the school year. As described in **Section 4.2.2**, it has identified the need for an attendance strategy. The Division also analyzed its graduation rates twice during the year (i.e., comparison to provincial graduation rate for First Nations and Métis, non-First Nations and Métis, male, female).

However, as described in **Section 4.1.4**, neither the Division nor its schools formally analyzed the survey results compared to the prior year. Such analysis would provide valuable input to assist the Division with explaining changes in student engagement results.

5.0 SELECTED REFERENCES

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