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Reducing Poverty to Improve Educational Outcomes

What a School Division
and a Local Community
Can do Together

By Jim Silver and Kate Sjoberg

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Introduction

Many Manitobans express concern when international ratings of students' educational achievements such as the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) are released. "What is wrong with our educational system," people ask when Manitoba is seen to rank poorly relative to other provinces and to the Canadian average (Manitoba 2019a). In this paper we argue that the issue is less "what is wrong with our educational system," than "why do we allow such very high levels of poverty to persist," when the statistical evidence is so absolutely clear that there is a causal relationship between poverty and low educational outcomes.

While poverty in Winnipeg is generally considered to be an inner city problem — in fact, is a significant problem in Winnipeg's inner city — nevertheless there are more people living in poverty in Winnipeg's suburbs than in Winnipeg's inner city, and there are pockets of suburban poverty that are every bit as severe as inner city poverty.

This is the case at three elementary schools in the Louis Riel School Division (LRS D), where the incidence of poverty is comparable to that in the inner city (see Table Two).

Further, our research makes it clear that the poverty in these three suburban neighbourhoods,

like that in much of the inner city, is "complex poverty" (Silver 2016), by which we mean not only a shortage of income, but also poor housing, poor health including especially the effects of trauma, unemployment, social exclusion, intimate partner violence, racism and colonialism. In addition, there is a propensity for those living in these circumstances to normalize their situation and blame themselves for the many challenges they face, which then often leads to low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence and in some cases even a sense of worthlessness. This form of poverty is exceptionally damaging to individuals, families and communities.

It therefore comes as no surprise, and is completely consistent with virtually all studies of poverty and education, that educational outcomes at these three schools are significantly lower than the divisional average. This problem begins even before children start grade one. Evidence for this is the Early Years Evaluation–Direct Assessment, conducted at each school to determine pre-school children's readiness for school (LRS D 2019). Table One shows that children about to enter these three schools are well behind the divisional averages with respect to important areas of cognitive and social development. As a result,

TABLE 1 Percentage of Pre-School Children Who are “Experiencing Significant Difficulty” in Selected Realms as of October 1, 2019, LRSD, Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools

Realm	LRSD	Lavallee	Victor Mager	Victor Wyatt
Awareness of Self and Environment	1.1%	50%	38%	39%
Cognitive Skills	1.5	30	33	32
Language and Communication	3.4	20	45	48

SOURCE: LRSD, *Direct Assessment Overall Domain Results*, October 1, 2019.

they are likely to be facing major challenges in school from the day they begin. It is no coincidence that poverty rates for children under the age of 6 years, as measured by the Low-Income Measure, After-Tax (LIM/AT), were 58 percent, 41 percent and 30 percent at Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools (Table Two). The primary cause of poor school outcomes is the complex poverty experienced by these children and their families.

In this paper, we argue that the cause of the lower-than-average educational outcomes at these three schools is *not* to be found in what the schools do or do not do. The evidence that we have is that the schools are excellent, and that they are responding to the challenges created by complex poverty in ways that are creative and effective. The root of the problem is the complex poverty and all of the adverse consequences that it produces, which even the best of schools cannot fully overcome.

Building on an Earlier Study

In an earlier study undertaken for and in association with the LRS D we documented the presence of severe poverty in the catchment areas of Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools. We then consulted widely with parents, community-based organizations and school and administrative staff to learn from them what they considered the poverty-related problems to be, how those problems affected their children's success at school, and what they believed might be done to solve those problems. Based on what they told us, together with our experience in the inner city and our reading of the relevant literature, we produced a report (Silver and Sjoberg 2017) for the School Division that included a series of recommendations aimed at combatting complex poverty by strengthening families and neighbourhoods in order to improve school outcomes.

The LRS D responded quickly to the report, hiring Sjoberg to work with senior administration, parents and the community to coordinate the implementation of the recommendations. The School Division has made significant investments of money, time and effort precisely where such investment is needed — in efforts to combat the complex poverty that drives down educational outcomes.

The School Division's efforts in pursuit of this strategy have been made necessary by the high incidence of complex poverty in the catchment areas of the three schools, the proven relationship between poverty and poor educational outcomes as found in the literature and described below, and the failure of all three levels of government to implement a well-funded, systemic and long-term approach to poverty reduction. The LRS D has worked creatively to meet the multiple challenges that are the consequence of this poverty, which has meant that the LRS D has played an expanded role relative to what is traditionally expected of educational institutions. The School Division has concluded, and our research supports the conclusion, that given the high levels of complex poverty at these three schools, such resourcefulness and creativity is *required* if educational outcomes are to be improved.

In this paper we describe: the incidence and character of the poverty in the catchment areas of the three schools, and the general effects of poverty on educational outcomes as found in the literature; the method that we used to prepare both the 2017 report and this paper; a summary of the findings of the 2017 report and the “whole

community” approach recommended in that report; and the many community engagement and capacity-building initiatives that have been implemented since 2017. We discuss the ration-

ale for these initiatives — i.e., how they relate to improved school outcomes — and make some additional recommendations aimed at building on what has been achieved to date.

Poverty in Three St. Vital Neighbourhoods

It is commonly believed that poverty in Winnipeg is an inner city phenomenon. This is only partially true. Poverty is highly concentrated in Winnipeg’s inner city, but far more poor families — approximately twice as many — live outside the inner city as within the inner city. Deep pockets of poverty are scattered throughout Winnipeg’s sprawling suburbs, including around three elementary schools in south St. Vital. At one of these schools, Lavallee, the poverty rates are a

bit higher than in the inner city as a whole, and about three times the rates for the suburbs as a whole. Poverty rates for families with children under six years living in Lavallee’s catchment area are considerably higher than in the inner city as a whole. At Victor Mager, poverty rates are just fractionally lower than inner city levels, and well over double those for the suburbs. Poverty rates in the neighbourhood where Victor Wyatt is situated are at about the average for the city

TABLE 2 Selected Indicators for Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools and their Neighbourhoods

Indicator	Lavallee	Victor Mager	Victor Wyatt	Non-Inner City	Inner City
Number of students	150	386	256	N/A	N/A
Poverty: LIM-AT*	30%	29%	16%	13%	30%
Poverty: LIM-AT, under age 6 years	58%	41%	30%	20%	48%
Poverty: LICO-AT*	27%	24%	14%	10%	26%
Poverty: LICO-AT under age 6 years	47%	29%	31%	16%	38%
Single-parent families	42%	22%	18%	17%	29%
Living in subsidized housing	47%	20%	28%	16%	23%
Annual Transiency	21%	20%	12%	13%	21%
Indigenous	24%	13%	12%	10%	22%

SOURCES: Statistics Canada. 2016. Census of Population: Community Data Program Custom Tabulation.

* There are three different measures of the incidence of poverty that are used in Canada: LIM-AT is the low-income measure after tax; LICO-AT is the low income cut-off after tax; and MBM is the market basket measure. We do not have 2016 data for the MBM. For a definition of each of these see Silver 2014.

as a whole, although well above the rates for the suburbs. However, these Victor Wyatt numbers are misleading. It has historically been the case that children from higher-income families in the area attend schools outside the neighbourhood,

while those attending Victor Wyatt are disproportionately from the neighbourhood's lower-income families. Our research makes it clear that the poverty in each of these neighbourhoods is complex poverty.

Poverty Adversely Affects School Outcomes

We know from data analyzed statistically by the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy that high levels of poverty are causally linked to poor educational outcomes. For example, in the highest-income quintile in Winnipeg, 98.5 percent of students graduate high school within six years of entering grade nine; in the lowest-income quintile 55.4 percent — just over half — of students graduate high school within six years of entering grade nine (Brownell et al. 2015: 44). This is consistent with the claim made by Brownell and her colleagues (2006: 4) that “socioeconomic status is the single most powerful predictor of educational outcomes,” and by Gaskell and Levin (2012: 12) that “socio-economic status (SES) is the single most powerful factor correlated with educational and other life outcomes, as has been found in virtually every important study of these issues, over time, in every country where such studies have been conducted.”

This can be seen clearly when we consider educational outcomes for Indigenous children. Even as early as age five, there are gaps between the educational outcomes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children in Manitoba, as measured by Early Development Indicator (EDI) scores. However, these gaps “largely disappear after socioec-

onomic status is taken into account” (Manitoba 2019b: 3). In other words, for those Indigenous children not growing up in poverty, educational outcomes are on a par with non-Indigenous children. It is poverty that is the problem.

In short, when we ask why some children are not doing well in school, and why educational outcomes are lower in some schools than others, it is likely that the answer has less to do with what is happening within the walls of the schools, and more to do with the poverty and related challenges experienced by children outside the schools.

That what is going on within the walls of the schools is not the problem is consistent with what parents told us about Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt in 2017:

Parents love these schools. Words like “amazing” and “exceptional” and “it’s a great school” were used by parents to describe their experience with these three schools. After one sharing circle Sjoberg described parents expressing an “overwhelming love for the school; overwhelming!” Parents and their children feel accepted and actively welcomed. Students and parents of differing cultural

backgrounds are learning about each other and getting along well. A wide range of programs are run by the schools to support parents and improve children's educational progress.

As will be seen below, parents interviewed in April and May, 2019, about their involvement with the parent-mentor program said much the same, expressing the view that the teachers at the three schools are outstanding.

The cause of the lower-than-average educational outcomes at these three schools is *not* to be found in what the schools do or do not do. The problem, to reiterate, is the poverty.

The complex poverty that we identified in our 2017 study has been described using two metaphors:

One is the notion of a complex web — a web of poverty, racism, drugs, gangs, violence. The other is the notion of a cycle — people caught in a cycle of inter-related problems. Both suggest the idea of people who are trapped, immobilized, unable to escape, destined to struggle with forces against which they cannot win, from which they cannot extricate themselves. The result is despair, resignation, anger, hopelessness, which then reinforce the cycle, and wrap them tighter in the web (CCPA-Mb 2005: 24).

This way of understanding poverty — as a complex web that can trap people in a cycle from which it is difficult to escape — was reflected in what we were told by parents in multiple focus groups conducted in 2017 (Silver & Sjoberg 2017). Many parents disclosed impacts of trauma including

anxiety, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, addictions and family dysfunction. Many men in the community are detached from the labour force and from their families and, said one community worker: “they’re almost invisible in our community... like, they float, they’re back with the mom and then they leave again because there’s conflict or whatever, the domestic violence, all that stuff happens” (Silver and Sjoberg 2017). Family crises, including domestic violence, mean that children often come to class straight from conflict, making learning particularly difficult.

We also found that parents face multiple barriers when trying to extricate themselves from these poverty-driven problems. For example, one parent observed that interactions with government services that are meant to support people in getting out of poverty were so frustratingly complex that these experiences helped to reinforce feelings of disempowerment. The result, he said, is that many of his neighbours are resigned to the belief that things will not get better for people in the neighbourhood, and that it is pointless even to try.

These are but some of the many structural barriers that prevent people from moving out of poverty, and that contribute to feelings of frustration and in some cases even hopelessness.

These experiences were clearly identified in a confidential report prepared for the LRSD by Melissa Foidart (2016), in which the extremely difficult circumstances of some families with children at these three schools are described. It is particularly difficult for children to do well in school when their parents are struggling in such poverty-driven circumstances.

The Method We Used

We were initially approached by the LRS D in December 2016, to discuss the lower-than-average educational outcomes at the three schools, and the Division’s belief that these outcomes were related to the high incidence of poverty in the schools’ catchment areas. The LRS D people with whom we initially met — Assistant Superintendent Irene Nordheim and then Lavallee School Principal Darcy Cormack — held the view that solutions required consulting in a meaningful way with the community. Relatedly, Nordheim and Cormack identified the Rene Deleurme Centre (RDC), a spacious former school attached to Lavallee School and at that time almost vacant, as a potential solution, or part of a solution, to the problem. They ventured that perhaps programming of various kinds could be located in the RDC, as well as at each of the schools, such as to meet the needs of students and their families. But rather than decide, in top-down fashion, what programs parents and their families needed, Nordheim and Cormack believed that parents themselves needed to be asked.

Following from this initial meeting we developed a version of a community-based participatory research (CBPR) methodology to meet these goals. In CBPR the research to be done is identified by “the community,” and is carried out in collaboration with the community, and it is built on the belief that people living and working in the community — in this case parents and local community-based organizations — are the “experts” in identifying what the problems are and what the solutions might be.

Kate Sjoberg, at that time a graduate student with previous experience as the Executive Director of both the Spence Neighbourhood Association and the North Point Douglas Women’s Centre, was hired in February, 2017. Silver and Sjoberg then met in early March, 2017, with Cormack and Melissa Foidart, Community Outreach Worker for the three schools, to discuss further the details of the project, and in mid-March 2017 met with the project’s Research Advisory Committee¹ to finalize preparations for the project.

¹ The Research Advisory Committee was, in 2017, comprised of the Principals of Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools, plus the Family Outreach Coordinator for the three schools, the Coordinator of Indigenous Education in the LRS D, and the Director of the Marlene Street Resource Centre.

The research conducted in 2017 included lengthy interviews with 80 informed respondents: 36 parents of children at the three schools; 31 teachers; the three Principals and three Vice-Principals; six staff members at Family Centres in the three schools; and one Assistant Superintendent. These interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed by the authors. We also

met with 12 community-based organizations that work with children and families in the area; discussed a rough draft of what would become the 2017 report with the Research Advisory Committee and made some revisions based on that discussion; and participated in a community session at which the results of our research were presented and discussed.

A Whole Community Approach

This community-based approach to the research led us to the conclusion that a “whole community” response to these poverty-related problems was what was needed to improve school outcomes. Such an approach is what we have argued is possible in the absence of a well-funded, government-driven systemic and long-term approach to the solving of poverty. The whole community approach that we recommended places a priority on the promotion of cooperation between the School Division, community-based organizations and other institutions, and families in the area. Driving this approach is the belief that engaging everyone to contribute, and to work together, will support better educational outcomes while producing many other benefits.

In addition to finding ample evidence of complex poverty and its very damaging effects, it became apparent to us that the primary strength of this community — the many poverty-related problems notwithstanding — is the families themselves. Every parent talked about what they are already doing in their families and community, and what they could contribute. Among the parents were bannock makers and language teachers, football coaches and math teachers, a physiotherapist, a plant specialist, artists, gardeners and school vol-

unteers. It became obvious to us that these skills, together with those of the community-based organizations and the schools themselves, needed to be appreciated and supported so that all can work together in building healthier families and communities. Healthier communities and families will, in turn, produce improved school outcomes for the children in these neighbourhoods.

The “whole community” approach that we recommended in 2017 consists of a wide range of initiatives that we grouped into three broad categories: high level advocacy; filling service gaps in the community; and maximizing the engagement of parents and students. The LRS D adopted this three-part approach whole-heartedly.

High Level Advocacy

One example of high level advocacy would be work with senior Manitoba Housing and other provincial government officials aimed at improving conditions in Manitoba Housing. Goals of this work would include improved funding for the effective Family Centres located in two of the neighbourhoods, a new Family Centre where one does not now exist, and efforts to engage residents in building community in their neighbourhoods.

Service Gaps

These three communities are located far from the city centre, yet it is in the city centre that many services needed by people who are poor are located. This dramatically reduces accessibility—a major problem exacerbated by frequent increases in transit fares. One example is the need for more Indigenous cultural activities for children and families. LRSD has been active in this for some time, employing language and cultural teachers, elders and support staff, and developing working relationships with Indigenous organizations, but Indigenous people expressed a strong desire to have even more opportunities to learn about and to practice their cultures.

Filling these gaps will strengthen families and build healthier neighbourhoods, which in due course will create the conditions in which children do better in school.

Deepening Engagement of Parents and Children

Deepening the engagement of parents and children in their communities and schools is a major objective of the “whole community” approach. Many parents were already involved at each of the schools, volunteering and participating in programs, and some were advocating regularly—for example on housing issues or access to health care. A central objective of the whole community approach has been to facilitate still more parent organizing and action, based on the premise that engaging parents in positive activities will contribute to the building of stronger and healthier families and communities, and that school outcomes will improve as a result.

In this 2019 paper, which follows from the earlier 2017 report (Silver & Sjoberg 2017), we have sought to determine the extent to which the elements of the “whole community” approach have been implemented. To do so we began by attending a January 24, 2019, community gathering at the Rene Deleurme Centre at which the LRSD and the community jointly reported on achievements to date. Approximately 60 people attended on a very cold night, including a significant number of parents.

In March, 2019, Silver and Sjoberg, along with Research Assistant Aja Oliver, met with LRSD Assistant Superintendent Irene Nordheim, who is the lead for this whole community approach, and Shelley Hooper, then Vice-Principal and now Principal at Lavallee School, to finalize arrangements for the research aimed at determining which of the recommendations made in the 2017 report have been implemented. In April and May, 2019, Silver interviewed a wide range of people in leadership positions with neighbourhood community-based organizations, as well as senior administrators, school-level administrators and Board Trustees with the LRSD and Family Centre staff at two of the schools—a total of 27 people. Oliver interviewed nine participants in the new parent-mentor program that had been recommended in the initial report. She also interviewed three Indigenous staff with the LRSD to develop a deeper understanding of those initiatives that are underway to meet the expressed needs of Indigenous students and families. The interviews done by Silver were not recorded, but thorough notes were taken; interviews conducted by Oliver were recorded and transcribed. All interviews were then discussed and analyzed by the authors.

Our Findings and Further Recommendations

The starting point of this project has been the well-established evidence that poverty has an adverse effect on school outcomes, that to improve school outcomes steps need to be taken to address poverty, and that one of the ways that this can be done is by strengthening families and building community. The steps that have been taken were determined by listening to what parents said they need, and then acting on what parents have said. This is an approach that seeks to “build from within,” by building upon the communities’ existing strengths. At the January 24, 2019 community feedback meeting Darcy Cormack described this approach as including the need to build upon existing strengths, to build *with* and not for people, to work in a cooperative manner, and to *listen* to what parents are saying. This is a community development approach, or what we are calling a “whole community” approach, predicated upon the belief that improving educational outcomes requires the active involvement of the whole community — parents, schools, various local community-based organizations — working together to strengthen families and communities in order to improve children’s school outcomes.

The Board of Trustees of the LRSD has played a lead role in promoting this approach. They un-

derstand, and have acted upon: the importance of the effects of poverty on school outcomes; the need to listen to those in the community, and especially parents, who are living with poverty; the value of a “whole community” approach; and the need to invest financially, to the extent that relatively limited resources allow, in community-based solutions. Board Chair Sandy Nemeth and Vice-Chair Louise Johnston explained that in 2013 the Trustees made governance changes that led them to spend less time on managerial details — leaving those to the managers — and more time on “big picture” questions about how to improve school outcomes. The result has been what they describe as the “groundbreaking work” — work that is essential if school outcomes in low-income areas are to be improved — that is now being done.

A great deal has been accomplished in the short time since we submitted our report in the late summer of 2017. Major gains have been made in several key areas: the populating of the Rene Deleurme Centre with educational opportunities for adults, settlement services for newcomers and childcare for their children, as well as after-school and weekend programming for students; the implementation of an exciting new parent-

mentor program in each of the three schools and the first iteration of a Red Road to Healing program at RDC; the further development of a wide array of Indigenous programming at each of the schools; and an increase in the numbers of parents engaged in various school activities. A host of other initiatives aimed at meeting needs identified in the 2017 report are at various stages of development.

A. Rene Deleurme Centre

The Rene Deleurme Centre (RDC) is a former school that is attached to Lavallee School. In 2017, it had been sitting largely empty for more than a decade. A central part of the “whole community” strategy has been to populate the RDC with programs and activities that would respond to community needs and strengthen neighbouring communities and families. That process is almost complete. The RDC is a bustling hub of positive activity with both adults and children participating in a range of highly effective programs; the co-location of these programs in one physical space adds to their effectiveness.

EDGE Skills Centre

EDGE is an adult learning centre that has moved two of its three programs into the RDC. The Literacy Program offers general academic upgrading for adult learners to a grade 9–10 level; the English as an Additional Language (EAL) program works with newcomers who are permanent residents to improve their English language skills to Level 5. In the most recent academic year there were 136 adult learners in the Literacy program and 250 newcomers in the EAL program. Both programs have lengthy wait lists. All of these adult learners also benefit from a range of short courses — first aid, cooking and nutrition, parenting, sewing and conversation circles, for example — offered on a regular basis by the Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program, which is also located in the RDC. That EDGE and the

Settlement Program are co-located in the RDC makes this possible, and both organizations see the co-location as being particularly valuable. Toulia Papagiannopoulos, Director of the EDGE EAL program and Joan Embleton, Director of the EDGE Literacy Program, were enthusiastic about these benefits. Staff from the different programs can speak face-to-face and find immediate solutions, they said. For the adult learners, the RDC is “definitely becoming a community place.”

The children of these adult learners benefit as well. Children do better in school when a parent or parents are themselves in school or have completed an adult education program. As Embleton put it, “if you improve the lives of parents...children’s lives will be better as well... that’s the backbone of all that we do here.” It is, as well, a central thrust of our argument about how to improve school outcomes.

The Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program

The Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program, co-located in the RDC, has worked with some 800 newcomers this year. When added to the almost 400 adults in the two EDGE programs, it makes the RDC a busy place, and it will be busier still when 60 new childcare spaces are added in 2020 to the 40 that already exist at the RDC.

Iftu Ibrahim, Director of the Immigrant Settlement Program, says that the LRSD has “one of the biggest populations of newcomers in Winnipeg.” The Immigrant Settlement Program offers a great deal of youth programming — basketball, soccer, swimming, a summer camp, for example. Their youth programs are “packed,” and are typically wait-listed, especially for the summer camps. For the adults the Settlement Program is the first point of contact in the neighbourhood. Staff at the Program work closely with newcomers, acting as intermediaries to assist with the requirements and complications of settlement — finding housing, accessing language training, meeting medical needs, getting children enrolled and set-

tled in school, interpreting as needed throughout the process (the four settlement workers speak ten languages between them).

Co-location in the RDC makes this adjustment process a great deal easier. For example, many of the adults are referred to the EDGE EAL program, which is in the same building — settlement workers told us that “the connection with EDGE is wonderful.” If the children are having difficulties adjusting at Lavallee School the parents and the settlement workers are right there, and the Settlement Program has a positive relationship with the LRSB — “we love them,” they say. Other programs are offered — for example, Mount Carmel Clinic partners with the Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program to run a cultural adaptation program, and Frontier College partners with the Settlement Program in running the summer camps. All of this makes the settlement process smoother and faster, and it logically follows that the sooner a newcomer family is settled in the community, the more likely are the children to succeed in school.

Much the same can be said for the work done at Victor Mager School, where a particularly high proportion of the students are newcomers. They have one full-time EAL teacher and one full-time Education Assistant supporting the transition of newcomer children into school. They provide what Principal Troy Reinhardt describes as a particularly comprehensive intake process for children as they arrive, which includes assessments and translators. Newcomer families are taken immediately to meet with the Boys and Girls Club, which is located at the school and is heavily used by newcomer children, and parents are introduced to the school’s Community Liaison Worker, who can provide additional and ongoing supports. The cultural diversity of the school is celebrated. For example, a recent cultural celebration evening was held for a large, recent influx of Chinese and Korean newcomer families. It was well attended and greatly appreciated by these families, who also had the

opportunity to meet other families, familiarize themselves further with the school and its staff and build community connections.

Morrow Avenue Child Care Programs for Families

The presence of high quality childcare in the Rene Deleurme Centre adds significantly to the strength of what has emerged there as a “hub” model, by which we mean the co-location of several programs that attract multiple and diverse community members for different but related and mutually beneficial purposes. Parents will have childcare available so that they can take advantage of adult learning opportunities. Children in the childcare centre will become familiar with the school environment before starting kindergarten, being taken into the adjoining school to see the kindergarten classroom and to meet the teacher and the Principal, easing the transition to school. Renovations within the RDC will start in late 2019, adding 60 childcare spaces to the 40 spaces already there, making 100 childcare spaces by 2020.

As Bonnie Ash, Executive Director of Morrow Avenue Child Care Programs for Families puts it, being in the RDC with EDGE and the Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program is “going to be just magnificent!” Not only will the childcare centre work with the children, but also they will more easily be able to refer parents, where that seems appropriate, to one of the EDGE programs. Further, as Ash adds: “the beauty of being located in a school is it acclimatizes parents to the school,” and bringing more parents into the school is one of the goals of the whole community approach. “We can work really well with parents to get them involved with the school,” says Ash.

A further benefit is that the childcare centre will take advantage of the Abecedarian approach. First implemented in the USA in 1972, the Abecedarian approach has been evaluated many times and the results have been reported

in several hundred peer-reviewed publications (Ramey et al. 2012). These have consistently demonstrated improved language skills and educational outcomes. A recent study (Campbell et al. 2012), to take one example, examined adults age 30 who had been participants as children in an Abecedarian childcare setting. It found, as have virtually all such studies, significant educational gains. For example, 30 year olds who had been in Abecedarian childcare programs were four times as likely as those in the control group to have completed a university degree.

The Abecedarian approach has been piloted in Winnipeg at Lord Selkirk Park since 2012. The results there have been positive. Lord Selkirk Park is a large Manitoba Housing complex in Winnipeg's North End, which had for decades been a troubled community, but which has undergone significant positive changes since 2006 (Silver et al. 2016; Mauro & Silver 2017). Data produced by Healthy Child Manitoba (2018: 9, 13–14) show that, by comparison with a control group of children who were in childcare but not exposed to the Abecedarian method, language skills have markedly improved. Jan Sanderson, Research Chair at Red River College and former CEO of Healthy Child Manitoba, was instrumental in piloting the Abecedarian approach at Lord Selkirk Park. She has said: “outcomes for the kids have been very good.” Carolyn Young, Director of the Lord Selkirk Park Childcare Centre, has gone further, saying in 2016 that “the changes in the children already are amazing” (Silver et al. 2016: 233). The parents of children exposed to the Abecedarian approach have made significant positive changes in their lives, changes that Sanderson describes as being “fantastic,” with a disproportionate number of them — motivated by the dramatic changes in their children — having chosen to pursue educational or employment opportunities. Further, almost none have had any involvement with Child and Family Services since their children began at the childcare centre. This is especially relevant since the evidence is clear

that children involved with CFS are much less likely to do well in school (Brownell et al. 2015a).

This Abecedarian approach will be brought to the Rene Deleurme Centre and the three schools' Family Centres. All childcare staff at the RDC as well as the Community Liaison Workers at each of the schools' Family Centres will be trained in the Abecedarian approach. Staff members in the childcare program at Red River College, who are expert in the Abecedarian approach, will do the training. The Abecedarian approach includes an enriched staff-child ratio; an individual learning plan for each child, with a staff member responsible for monitoring each child's plan; a heavy emphasis on the acquisition of language skills acquired through daily interactive reading; and the use of an outreach worker who visits the children's parents in their homes, builds relationships with the parents and teaches them the learning games that are also a part of the Abecedarian approach.

The overall result is that children attending the childcare centre at the Rene Deleurme Centre will derive the advantages that accrue from Manitoba's high quality childcare system, together with the added benefits that flow from exposure to the Abecedarian approach. By this means alone they will be better prepared for school. And the fact that their parents are able, because of access to childcare, to pursue literacy and English language programming that is located on-site will also promote better school outcomes, because particularly in low-income settings, children whose parents are in school are likely themselves to do better in school.

The Rene Deleurme Boys and Girls Club

Children are also benefitting from the new Rene Deleurme Boys and Girls Club, which opened October 5, 2018. This is the first new Boys and Girls Club in Winnipeg in some 15 years, and it represents, as LRSD Assistant Superintendent Irene Nordheim puts it, “a huge visible response to a community request,” since the parents interviewed

in 2017 said emphatically that they wanted more after-school opportunities for their children. The LRSB has responded to that community request, and is funding this new Boys and Girls Club on the grounds that doing so will improve school outcomes. This is a significant financial commitment.

Boys and Girls Clubs offer a range of sports and recreational, and arts and cultural and developmental programs for children and youth — “we are *not* just a drop-in centre,” says Alex Simonavicius — and have a proven track record of success. Programming at the Rene Deleurme Club occurs after school on three week days, and on Saturday and Sunday afternoons, and as of late March, 2019, the Club already had 130 children and youth signed up and participating. Alex Simonavicius describes the Rene Deleurme Boys and Girls Club as a “safe and inclusive space where they’ll be supported and celebrated,” and refers to the “little impacts that you see every day.” Working out of Lavallee School, attached to the RDC, is important because the Club has a “great relationship” with Lavallee, and “the school is very kind and generous to us,” says Simonavicius.

Boys and Girls Clubs improve the lives of children and youth, thus improving the likelihood that they will succeed in school, as demonstrated at the Boys and Girls Club active at Victor Mager School for some 25 years. Bonnie Ash worked alongside the Victor Mager Club and says, “they did amazing things.” Shauna Archer, former Vice-Principal and Troy Reinhardt, Principal at Victor Mager, describe the work done by the Club as “unbelievable.” It is “jam-packed, overflowing all the time and so vibrant,” they say, adding that it would be “hard to exaggerate the impact” that the Club has on the community. “It creates community, for sure,” they say, and doing so is at the heart of the “whole community” approach.

There is considerable peer-reviewed research evidence that after-school programs such as the Boys and Girls Clubs contribute to positive youth development. Evidence suggests that if young people become involved at a Boys and

Girls Club — and they do if there are supportive staff and a positive atmosphere with fun things to do (Roffman et al. 2001) — then there are likely to be gains in their self-concept, their resiliency, their attitudes toward school and their success at school. For example, the literature demonstrates that “involvement in high quality after-school programs, as well as other extracurricular activities, is related to improved school attendance and performance, more involvement with adults, better peer relations, and enhanced prosocial behaviors” (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2003: 40). A study of youth participants at a Boys and Girls Club in an American city “confirms past research noting the positive impacts of physical activity, sport and recreation participation on enhancing self-esteem, self-concept, leadership, and cooperation skills and decreasing the display of problem behaviors.” Further, “overall participation in the Club was related to enhanced academic achievement and school engagement” (Anderson-Butcher et al. 2003: 50 & 52). Other evidence (Roffman et al. 2001; Anderson-Butcher & Cash 2010, for example) confirms these findings, and links improved self-concept and self-esteem to enhanced resilience and, in turn, reduced problem behaviours — all of which contribute to improved school outcomes.

These various programs — adult literacy, English as an additional language, childcare using the Abecedarian approach, settlement services and the Boys and Girls Club — each benefit from the fact that they are working together in the same space at the now fully-populated Rene Deleurme Centre. Staff at the different programs interact with each other daily, exchanging ideas and working cooperatively to prevent people from falling through the cracks and to maximize the programs’ collective impact.

B. Indigenous Initiatives

There is a significant Indigenous population in the catchment areas of the three schools, and

many of the parents that we interviewed in 2017 expressed a strong desire to connect with their Indigenous cultures, and to have opportunities for their children to be similarly connected. The LRSB and these three schools in particular, have taken a great many steps to meet this expressed need. Many of these initiatives preceded our 2017 report; some have been added because of that report.

Among the new initiatives added since 2017 are cultural evenings with elders every other Wednesday at the RDC. Indigenous community members are attending, participating, and are responding with enthusiasm. Sjoberg, who has organized these evenings, says, “there is a momentum happening that is very, very good... people are thirsty for it.” Sjoberg says that parents — including some who are coming from Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools — are responding positively. They tell her, “I’ve never had access to this kind of thing my whole life,” and then add that the next week they plan to bring their sister or cousin or neighbour to the evening’s events. These evenings are engaging parents in a collective process of cultural reclamation and community building, which will strengthen families and neighbourhoods and lead to improved school outcomes.

Another especially important Indigenous initiative added because of the 2017 report is the Red Road to Healing program. After a great deal of hard work to raise the funding, a Red Road to Healing program was confirmed in mid-April, 2019, and started in May, 2019, using funds secured by St. Vital City Councillor Brian Mayes. The program, developed by Shannon Buck and rooted in Indigenous cultural practices, has been successful in recent years at a number of organizations including West Central Women’s Resource Centre, Ma Mawi Wi Chi Itata Centre and North Point Douglas Women’s Centre. Demand for the program has been high. There is genuine enthusiasm for Indigenous cultural learning, healing and self-development among

the parent populations at the three schools. If results achieved at other organizations hold for this edition of the program, we anticipate that outcomes will include healing, which will lead to strengthened sense of self and the acquisition of tools to support stronger family and community relationships and ongoing personal growth. Red Road to Healing is a powerful response to the widespread trauma that was identified in the 2017 report. In that study, following from the sharing circles with 36 parents, we wrote that:

There was much discussion of domestic abuse and violence in families’ past, and evidence of associated trauma. Some women spoke of this during a sharing circle; others waited until the group had left before disclosing. One woman described leaving an abusive relationship “and I stayed in shelters, women’s shelters, for a few years,” while another, a residential school survivor, said she had recently left a long-term abusive relationship and returned to Winnipeg from another province. At one sharing circle a woman said, “the domestic abuse is huge, I mean, I think if we put our hands up at this table I’d say probably the majority of us have been in situations,” to which another woman immediately replied, “absolutely!” Clearly, intimate partner violence is a big part of their lives for many families. What we observed was evidence of cycles: of poverty, of violence and abuse, of trauma. Women said they need access to supports in order to heal.

The Red Road to Healing program is a direct response to this expressed need to heal.

Many important Indigenous initiatives were already in place in 2017, and in fact, the LRSB is very active in promoting Indigenous student success and Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Corey Kapilik was, until this year, the Coordinator of Indigenous Education for LRSB and is now Principal at the Division’s Marion School. He has been energetic in promoting a wide range of programs, including Indigenous

languages, treaty education, an ECHO program that helps students transition to high school by having an Indigenous teacher available to talk with students leading up to that often difficult transition, and a team of five elders who work throughout the LRS D. Kapilik does “a lot of work with Principals” for the purpose of “embedding Indigenous perspectives or understandings into their school plan.” He works especially on finding ways to build community with Indigenous parents, and is working on building a LRS D sweat lodge, something that “a lot of our parents would be very happy about.” These programs are having an impact. “We’ve seen a growth of almost 20 percent over five years of Indigenous students graduating within four years of entering grade nine.”

Yet many Indigenous parents, Kapilik says, don’t feel part of their school community.

I don’t think parents right now see themselves as a part of the community....they see themselves as, you know, their children go to school here. But what I would like to see more of is parents being part of what happens here, parents having agency and autonomy in what happens here, parents developing self-determination for themselves and for their children.... I think there’s that invisible brick wall in front of the doors of our schools still, I think we still have a lot of work to do.

The challenge of building community amongst Indigenous parents and building a stronger connection with their children’s schools is still a major part of what needs to happen. This challenge is directly related to the high rates of complex poverty, especially at these three schools. Kapilik told us: “I was actually pretty surprised when I came here how deep the poverty is although very hidden, very, a lot of poverty.”

An example of the process of Indigenous cultural reclamation and community-building that was already in place in 2017 is the work of Elder Jules Lavallee. He divides his time among

several LRS D schools including these three, and has developed relationships with and earned the trust of many Indigenous parents. Evidence of this is, to take one example, the fact that parents are asking him to perform naming ceremonies for their children. A number of such ceremonies have been conducted to date. They involve parents offering tobacco to the elder, and preparing a feast as part of the ceremony, which also includes a traditional drummer and singer. One parent described taking her three children to get their spirit names, and said “I walked out of there with a positive mind and I just felt so much better about myself,” and she is now arranging, at her children’s request, to get them involved in Indigenous drumming and singing. Cultural awareness and engagement by Indigenous parents and their children will lead to improved school outcomes, as evidenced repeatedly in Winnipeg’s inner city (Silver 2013). Indigenous families are anxious to learn about and participate in their culture, and as Cormack has put it, “definitely a community has been built around that.”

Metis elder Reid Hartry, who works out of Lavallee School, has made drums with Indigenous parents who have participated in the cultural evenings on Wednesdays. Drum-making is not just about the actual making of the drums. Hartry uses the practical task of making Indigenous drums as an opportunity to talk with participants about Indigenous cultural teachings. His work is driven by the teachings of Martin Brokenleg, and emphasizes building relationships and building a sense of belonging.

Parents are also participating in the Indigenous Parent Program on Wednesday afternoons at the Rene Deleurme Centre. This program started in 2003 and, in the words of Indigenous Community Worker Darlene Tomsic, it has “grown tremendously” since then. It’s a drop-in program that offers free childcare and is based on the idea of parents — Indigenous and non-Indigenous — learning and doing Indigenous crafts and getting to know and support each other. Parents often talk about

Indigenous issues — missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, for example — and get to know each other well enough that they socialize outside the program. A sense of community is built. Out of all of this they come to the realization, says Tomsic, “that Indigenous culture is a beautiful thing” and they “feel proud to share it.”

At Victor Mager School, Elder Jules Lavallee comes on a bi-weekly basis to meet with small groups of students and with classrooms and with teachers and in some cases with family members. Elder Jules is “really well respected,” says former Vice-Principal Shauna Archer, and many children and families are becoming more closely involved with their cultures, and with other Indigenous families, as a result of the relationships that have been established and the trust that has developed.

There is a pow wow club at Lavallee School, which is popular enough that it has recently been expanded to every other Wednesday. Between 50 and 75 students attend, including 8 to 10 from Victor Mager School and some from Victor Wyatt, and while the children and youth are in the gym with the pow wow club, many of their parents are in the Indigenous Parent Program at the RDC, making regalia for pow wows. Again, Indigenous families are being invited to practice their cultures, and to connect with other families with similar interests. This collective cultural resurgence adds significantly to community building and community strength.

At Victor Wyatt School, where about 30 per cent of students are Indigenous, former Principal Jordan Falconer described a wide range of Indigenous cultural and educational initiatives that are underway. Treaty education is a theme in all classrooms; the Circle of Courage is used in most classrooms; an after-school hoop dancing club attracts some 15–20 students every Thursday; students participate in the LRSB-wide pow wow; and some children and parents at Wyatt are participating in the cultural evenings every other Wednesday at RDC.

At Victor Mager School Mitch Bourbonniere runs a “beautiful Indigenous family night” once per month. Evenings open with a smudge, followed by a sharing circle that, as he puts it, is “often pretty powerful.” There are cultural teachings, followed by a feast. People come to see that they are valued. Healing — made necessary by the trauma brought about by colonialism — occurs. Families meet and get to know each other, opening the possibility of what Bourbonniere describes as “natural self-help.”

Each of these initiatives, those already in place in 2017 and those added since, is part of a process of cultural reclamation that is building healthier and stronger families and communities, and that is a response to the damage caused to Indigenous families by colonialism and by complex poverty. Stronger and healthier families and communities and increased cultural awareness and engagement will lead to improved school outcomes for children.

C. The Parent-Mentor Program

A new parent-mentor program, recommended in the 2017 report, is well underway with a third cohort in progress in the Fall, 2019. The parent-mentor program is modelled on a highly successful Chicago program (Hong 2011) visited by Cormack and Nordheim in 2018. The LRSB version of the program has involved for the most part Indigenous parents, although it is not limited to Indigenous parents nor is it specifically an Indigenous program. Three parents spend half a day in a school classroom at one of each of the three schools four days per week, and get together on the fifth day for various collective learning activities. Participants in each cohort are paid a \$500 honorarium for their involvement in the program.

Time spent in the classroom by these nine parents has led to a new appreciation of the challenges of teaching and of the teachers, thus producing a shift in thinking in most cases from

the school as a place to be avoided and in some cases even feared, to the school as a positive place for them and their children. At Victor Mager School, for example, the Principal and Vice-Principal told us that the parent mentors there gained an “increased connection to the school” and an “increased understanding of the school.” They developed “more confidence in their own capacities,” including the “confidence to come and speak to administration” about their children’s education. Much of the learning that takes place on the fifth day each week has a strong Indigenous focus, adding to participants’ cultural awareness and to their self-esteem and self-confidence. All of this will contribute to improved school outcomes for their children.

This was confirmed in interviews with the parent mentors conducted by Aja Oliver in April and May, 2019. In almost all cases these parents grew up in poverty. As one described it, “I was ashamed of who we were” and “felt inferior growing up.” Racism has been a part of their experience. One parent spoke of her life as a child in a northern Manitoba town, “a town that was racist,” where “we couldn’t walk around the town by ourselves, there was always the chance where they might do something, like they liked to throw stuff at you.” Yet in almost all cases these parents said that participation in the parent-mentor program increased their confidence in themselves. “It definitely helped me to gain more confidence,” said one, while another referred to her long-time difficulty with social anxiety, which made it difficult for her to talk to other people, but because of her participation in the parent-mentor program, “I can stop on the street now and talk to everyone and it’s definitely helped me overcome that.” In almost all cases, the parents made it clear that participating in the program has contributed to their resolve to build on the gains they have made.

All confirmed that their experience in the program has changed their attitudes about the schools. For example, one parent said she now

has “such respect for every teacher that I’ve encountered, ’cause you see what they go through.” Others made virtually identical comments, speaking to the challenges of teaching and the skills of the teachers. These parents — and in one case a woman raising her grandchildren — now feel motivated because of the program. “You know, I just love it and it’s like you have purpose...to live a purposeful life.” Some expressed a desire to help more in their children’s school, and at least one hoped to work at her school.

Parents said that their children are proud of them for doing the program, and proud of the changes that have resulted. Said one parent: “I think she’s proud of me in some ways. I think she’s happy to see me more active...within the school and being more aware, just, I guess, as a different Mom she sees.” This parent added that she now feels better able to help her daughter with schoolwork. Another parent described how her daughter reacted when her classmates saw her Mom at the school: “She turned around and she just broke down crying. She’s like, ‘everybody, that’s my Mom, I’m so proud of her!’” This parent added, “my son is doing so much better in class now because I’m here, because I’m present, because I can be on top of all his work.”

This program is strong evidence of the many benefits that arise when parents are engaged in such a program — benefits to the parents and by extension to their children. The parent-mentor program is contributing to building stronger and healthier families and communities, and children’s school outcomes are improving as a result. All of the parent-mentors expressed the opinion that the program ought to be offered on an ongoing basis, and that is the intention.

D. Reaching the Most Marginalized Families
An important part of the “whole community” process is the creation of opportunities for parents and other community members to come together in positive collective activities. This is

consistent with the recommendations made in the 2017 report under the heading of “deepening the engagement of parents and children.” Doing so will decrease social isolation and open possibilities for connection to the kinds of resources that can strengthen and stabilize families and communities. Among the many positive effects will be improved school outcomes.

Each of the three schools already hosts a wide array of activities beyond the normal process of classroom teaching. Deepening parents’ engagement involves, in part, finding the ways to draw into these existing activities more parents than are already involved, and especially those whose poverty and related circumstances have resulted in their being particularly marginalized. Too often it is the children of these most marginalized families whose attendance is a problem and whose level of learning is below grade expectations.² It appears that a disproportionate number of these families live in Manitoba Housing and are Indigenous.

Improving the school outcomes of those children living in particularly marginalized families is a problem whose solution lies in large part *outside* the classroom. It involves both reaching out to those families to build relationships and earn trust, and finding ways to bring those families into the schools and/or into the Rene Deleurme Centre, where they can become involved with other parents in programs that are offered. Doing so breaks down social isolation and builds a sense of community. Stronger and healthier communities and families will lead to improved school outcomes.

While many skilled community organizations, and the LRSD, deserve full credit for doing this work, because doing so is necessary if school

outcomes are to be improved, it is nevertheless important to emphasize that their support for these community-building initiatives is made necessary only because the three levels of government are not meeting the needs of those who are poor. The School Division is trying to fill at least some of the gaps left as a result.

Because of these efforts many steps have already been taken to engage parents in ways that will strengthen families and neighbourhoods and ultimately improve school outcomes. These include the adult literacy and EAL and childcare and immigrant settlement work at the Rene Deleurme Centre, and immigrant settlement work at Victor Mager, and perhaps especially the new parent-mentor program and the many Indigenous initiatives now underway at RDC and in the schools, such as the Wednesday evening pow wow club and parent gatherings, the Indigenous Parent Program at RDC on Wednesday afternoons, the multi-faceted work of elders Jules Lavallee and Reid Hartry, Mitch Bourbonniere’s monthly feasts and the Red Road to Healing program. These are drawing growing numbers of Indigenous people into the schools where they are reclaiming their cultures and building relationships with other Indigenous families, all of which contribute to strengthening families and communities and ultimately, we hypothesize, improving school outcomes.

Over the past year this community work has expanded into “the portable,” a building adjacent to the Rene Deleurme Centre that was previously used as overflow office space for the Division. Melissa Brown and Kate Sjoberg have moved their offices into the portable. The RDC clothing closet is now in this space, computers have been set up for use by the community, especially for

² Lavallee School has taken a variety of steps to improve school outcomes, with considerable success to date. In 2016/17, 35 percent of Lavallee students had an absentee rate of 10 percent or higher. In 2017/18 the proportion of Lavallee students with an absentee rate of 10 percent or higher was reduced to 26 percent, and in 2018/19 it was down further to 15 percent. Many factors contribute to absenteeism, but the school introduced a balanced school day in 2017/18 that may have contributed to improved attendance, and has been meeting with the families of children whose absentee rate exceeds 10 percent to try to determine what might be done to improve their children’s attendance.

research and job application work, and there is a sunlit seating area that offers a welcoming space for meetings and workshops. The portable has become host to expanded Indigenous cultural work and learning, and community gatherings, and it provides a community space for parents and other community members to use as they choose. It now hosts a regular book club. The group started with *In Search of April Raintree* and continued with Katherina Vermette's *The Break*. Regular medicine pickings are organized. The parent mentor program meets there weekly. And it has become a drop-in space for crafting, reading and visiting.

All of this programming needs to be maintained and built upon, in order to attract even more families into the schools.

School-Based Family Centres and the Family Outreach Coordinator

In addition, each school has a Family Centre, and these are highly effective in engaging parents and pre-kindergarten children. In 2017, based on what we learned from sharing circles with 36 parents at the three schools, we wrote that:

The Family Centres in each of the schools, and the staff who work there, were identified repeatedly in the most glowing terms. Parents told us that they have come to rely upon the Family Centres for a range of supports, and it is clear that the Family Centres are an important and effective means of dealing with the social isolation, depression and dysfunction that many parents are experiencing. A parent described one of the Family Centre staff as “an angel,” and said that she “engages with the whole family, and so we all grow together. This builds a lot of confidence for us.” Staff members at each of the Family Centres are very highly regarded by parents. One parent described the staff at one of the Family Centres as “really connected with the community, really involved,” while another parent said of staff at another of the

Family Centres: “They’re amazing!” Another parent referred to a range of complex personal problems and then said: “But I met [one of the Family Centre staff] and she offered me everything and I was, I felt broken, and then I felt like I was starting something new and it was so exciting and my kids were excited and now ... they want to stay, so we’re happy.”

Staff members in the Family Centres actively reach out to parents in the community. One staff person described in 2017 how this can work:

I can think of one family, this was years ago, we wanted her in the building; we wanted to connect with her, right? So for a couple of years, at least twice a month...I'd go knock on her door and she'd answer the door, naked with a towel around her and “not today.” And the next time I'd bring some groceries, and the next time, and then finally, like, now she's in the school, she's participating in [community] kitchen and I just never, ever stopped, right? No matter how many times she said “no” or “not today” I just never gave up. [And today] she's just this beautiful mom who is doing really well now.

This kind of outreach continues. Says Colleen Fredrickson of the Lavallee Family Centre: “I do so much outreach.” If a child has not attended for a couple of days Fredrickson phones, and if that does not work she knocks on doors. “It's so important” that this outreach be done, she says. Joanne Kolt of the Victor Mager Family Centre says the same. When asked what impacts her Family Centre has she replies without hesitation: “the impact is absolutely enormous.” Those families that come to the Family Centre become involved in other school-based programs and make a real connection with the school. “This makes a huge impact on a family,” says Kolt, and like Fredrickson she stresses the importance of more outreach to involve the most marginalized families, the ones who despite her efforts have not yet become involved with the Family

Centre. More outreach is needed, she says, because “there’s just so much need,” thus echoing the comments of LRS D Indigenous Education Coordinator Corey Kapilik.

A similar kind of outreach work is done by Melissa Brown (Melissa Foidart in 2017), the Family Outreach Coordinator (FOC) for the three schools. We described her work in 2017 as follows:

The goal that has been set for the FOC is to “Build and enhance capacity for active engagement and involvement of parents/families in the education of their children, with a particular emphasis on the most disadvantaged, marginalized families/parents in the community” (Foidart 2016: 1). One can think of parents and families at these schools using the image of “layers” or “sedimentation.” Those parents in the top “layer” will respond to opportunities when they are presented. Those at lower layers need varying degrees of support. At the bottom layers are those suffering the most from the kinds of problems described above — they are socially isolated, lacking in self-esteem and suffering in various ways. “The deep impacts of colonization, the residential school system and historical trauma have had strong and lasting effects on the families who are a part of this Initiative” (Foidart 2016: 3). In this work, Foidart argues, “everything begins and ends with relationships” and “much of the initial time spent with a family is centred on building a solid relationship with the primary caregiver” (Foidart 2016: 3). Staff in the Family Centres say exactly the same — building relationships, although often slow and difficult, is key. This is extremely challenging work, as can be seen in Foidart’s report, and it is to the credit of the LRS D that this position has been established. This position is another asset in the community, and Foidart is highly skilled and effective in carrying out these responsibilities. Working with these most marginalized families as she does has had the effect, among others,

of improving the school performance of the children in the families (Foidart 2016: 20), which is ultimately its purpose.

In short, the school-based Family Centres do important work with children and their parents and in reaching out to more marginalized families, and the Family Outreach Coordinator is highly effective in the crucial work of reaching out to and developing relationships with the most marginalized families. This is work that is necessary if families and communities are to be strengthened and school outcomes improved. It is clear that these efforts need to be maintained and built upon.

Two Important Programs to be Maintained and Expanded

In addition, two particularly important programs ought to be not only maintained, but expanded. One is the parent-mentor program which, as described above, has had a powerful impact on participants in a variety of ways that are directly and indirectly related to improved school outcomes for children. The success of this program has been such that it ought to be offered on an ongoing basis. This is currently the intention, and in fact the third cohort is going through the program in the Fall, 2019. Those who complete the program are motivated to carry on with building a better life for themselves and their families. Their confidence has been improved, their children are proud of them and they are keen to give back to the community and especially to the schools. If run consistently year after year this parent-mentor program would produce large and ever-growing numbers of people who would be active in community-building efforts that will contribute to improved school outcomes. That has been the experience in Chicago, where such a program has been offered consistently over many years (Hong 2011), and the same will be the case in the neighbourhoods surrounding these three schools.

The other initiative that ought to be expanded is the Red Road to Healing program, which began in May, 2019, and which has produced particularly positive outcomes for Indigenous parents when used elsewhere in the city. Red Road to Healing is a direct response to the high incidence of unresolved trauma identified in our 2017 report. As parents heal, children will be more likely to succeed in school. We maintain that a Red Road to Healing program ought to be at all times either underway and/or scheduled soon to begin. How to fund the program on an ongoing basis is an issue, and perhaps that is best achieved by working with partners in the community in a way consistent with the “whole community” approach.

If multiple iterations of the parent-mentor and Red Road to Healing programs were to be run, and if this were to continue to be done year after year, those who complete the programs would become a numerically large contingent of people who would contribute in a wide variety of ways to building stronger and healthier families and neighbourhoods. School outcomes would improve as a result.

Manitoba Housing and Poor School Outcomes

Many of the families that are most marginalized live in one or other of the Manitoba Housing complexes located in the catchment areas of the three schools. In 2016 almost half of the students at Lavallee, more than one-quarter of students at Victor Wyatt and one in five of the students at Victor Mager lived in subsidized housing, which in most cases means Manitoba Housing complexes. It follows that it is in those housing complexes that much of the important outreach work needs to be done.

A major part of that outreach can be done by the Family Centres located in two of the Manitoba Housing complexes, and with the addition of a third as recommended in the 2017 report. Such Family Centres are able to reach the most

marginalized families in these communities, and at least one study, referred to below, has found that they produce school-related benefits for children.

The Marlene Street Resource Centre is located in one of the housing units in a Manitoba Housing complex located directly across the school playground from Lavallee School and the Rene Deleurme Centre. Over 80 families live there. Nearly 40 percent are Indigenous, 16 percent are newcomers and over 70 percent are single-parent families according to data assembled by Resource Centre staff. A significant number of these families are among those most marginalized from Lavallee School, and the children of these most marginalized families are disproportionately among those with high rates of absenteeism.

The Marlene Street Resource Centre plays an important role in the “whole community” approach, because they operate in a way that brings them into very close contact with the residents. They are closer to the Marlene Street residents than the School Division could possibly be, and that gives the Resource Centre an important role to play in the whole community approach. “We have a different perspective because we are implanted in the community,” says Lorcen Gray, a community worker there. Resource Centre staff support people in the housing complex on a daily basis in a face-to-face, one-on-one and rather informal fashion. The Centre has an open door policy. People come in with a wide variety of issues, often just to talk and share their burdens — many people are “dealing with some pretty extreme things on a day to day basis,” say the staff, and “they’ll share a lot more with us” than with those in more institutionalized settings. The Resource Centre sees its work as being *complementary* to that done in the Rene Deleurme Centre. Their view is that those at the RDC are “really good at the bigger programs,” but “certain things we can definitely do better than them,” because they are informal and close at hand and know the community so well.

The same is the case at Woodydell Family Centre, run by Family Dynamics and located in a 100 unit Manitoba Housing complex close to Victor Wyatt School. In her 2012 study of Family Centres in six suburban Manitoba Housing complexes, including Woodydell, Sarah Cooper (2012: 25) found that staff at the Family Centres aim to build the capacities of residents by working to develop relationships and earn their trust. These Family Centres use a community development approach that is consistent with our “whole community” approach. Residents were found to benefit in a variety of ways from the presence of a Family Centre, including increased self-confidence and an increased feeling of community safety. Similar positive effects were found at Lord Selkirk Park, where a 2012 evaluation in that Manitoba Housing complex found the Resource Centre to be “highly successful” and having a “profound impact in the lives of neighbourhood residents” (Silver et al. 2016: 233). In the suburban housing complexes studied by Cooper (2012: 1), she found that children also benefitted from the presence in the community of a Family Centre. Residents “talked about their children’s improved self-esteem and social skills, and about having better communication and relationship skills with family members,” effects that are likely to contribute directly to improved school outcomes.

However, today the Woodydell Family Centre is under-resourced and overwhelmed by the challenges in the community. The Family Centre had six full-time staff when it opened in 2002; today it has two full-time staff. Over the same period the problems in the community have grown. Nancy Grant told us of the increased incidence of violence in the community, which she says is largely attributable to the “huge meth crisis...the police are called so many times to the community.” Apprehensions by Child and Family Services are commonplace. When children are returned to their families after an apprehension, CFS supports are not sufficient to help them adjust to the disruption and trauma associated with removal

from their families. The Family Centre staff say that if funding were available they would benefit not only from improved staffing levels and a more sizeable space that would enable them to meet more of the community’s needs, but also that space is needed for a commercial kitchen because, as Grant puts it, “people are hungry here.” Conditions at this Manitoba Housing complex make it difficult for children to succeed at school.

Given that a significant proportion of the students at the three schools live in Manitoba Housing, and that these families are disproportionately among the most marginalized, and given the evidence that Family Centres in Manitoba Housing complexes can produce such positive outcomes, we believe that the following two recommendations are warranted. These are recommendations that are consistent with the whole community approach that we have advocated and much of which has been implemented. It takes the involvement of the whole community — Manitoba Housing included — to improve school outcomes.

First, as recommended in our 2017 report, a new Family Centre needs to be established at the Manitoba Housing complex on Beliveau Street close to Victor Mager School. We are hopeful that this may soon happen. A senior Manitoba Housing official toured the Beliveau Street complex, with the result that efforts are now underway to locate a Family Centre there. This would be another important step forward in strengthening the communities around these three schools.

Second, the Family Centres at Marlene Street, Woodydell and (hopefully, soon) Beliveau Street need to be sufficiently resourced that they can offer the full range of services and supports needed in these communities, including advocacy around housing and income security issues, programming that responds to the needs of children and adults in the community, and more broadly, developing relationships with and earning the trust of residents. This is an important and effective means of reaching out to those most marginalized families whose children are, as a result, more

likely to be frequently absent and less likely to be doing well in school.

Well-resourced family centres in Manitoba Housing complexes are an important part of the

process of community engagement and capacity building aimed at reducing poverty and improving school outcomes at Lavallee, Victor Mager and Victor Wyatt Schools.

Conclusions

The LRSD has supported, and the LRSD’s senior administration and staff along with community-based organizations have worked to implement, an innovative, “whole community” approach to the improvement of lower-than-average school outcomes in three elementary schools in high-poverty neighbourhoods. First, they have taken seriously the evidence that poverty produces poor school outcomes, and have acted on that evidence by investing in anti-poverty efforts. Second, they have supported a community development approach to combatting poverty, rooted in the belief that engaging parents in any of a wide variety of activities will strengthen families and communities, which in time will improve school outcomes.

This approach to raising school outcomes suggests the power of *ideas* — the School Division has taken seriously a set of ideas that have pushed them to invest in innovative strategies to improve school outcomes. This approach also suggests the importance of school boards that are rooted in their local communities and are thus aware of the particulars of the families and communities that they serve. And finally, this approach reveals the School Division’s and senior administration’s willingness to move beyond

the all-too-common practice of the school as an “island” in a low-income community — they are reaching out to low-income families and working collaboratively with local community-based organizations to find a myriad of ways to engage parents.

Much has already been achieved, especially but not only at the Rene Deleurme Centre and with Indigenous cultural programming. More is in the works, especially the implementation of programs with an established track record in responding to trauma, and in building the capacities and capabilities of families that are all-too-often ignored. These gains can be tracked over time by counting the growth in the numbers of people who are engaged in one or other of the many programs now in place or about to be put in place. The theory that drives this approach is that engaging parents in positive activities that improve their skills and their self-confidence will strengthen those families, will strengthen whole communities, and will in time — it is critically important to acknowledge that this is not a quick fix approach — improve school outcomes.

Parents overwhelmingly expressed the view that the schooling their children are experiencing is excellent. Interviews with teachers and

Principals and other staff suggested the same. Far from finding inadequacies in the schools, we found ongoing evidence of creative and effective efforts to meet the needs of children whose education is being adversely affected by complex poverty. This kind of poverty is widespread and severe, not only in Winnipeg's inner city but

also in many pockets in the suburbs. It is the poverty that is the problem, and it is clear that this requires a systemic, well-funded and long-term poverty reduction strategy led by all three levels of government. In the absence of such a strategy, it is to the credit of the LRSD that they have acknowledged and acted upon that reality.

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Personal Interviews

A. Conducted by Aja Oliver

- Hartry, Reid. 2019. Metis Elder, Lavallee School. June 6.
- Kapilik, Corey. 2019. Coordinator of Indigenous Education, LRSD. June 19.
- Tomsic, Darlene. 2019. Community Worker, Indigenous Parent Program. June 11.
- Nine anonymous parents who participated in the parent-mentor program. April and May, 2019.

B. Conducted by Jim Silver

- Archer, Shauna. 2019. Vice-Principal, Victor Mager School. April 16.
- Ash, Bonnie. 2019. Executive Director, Morrow Street Childcare. March 29.
- Billett, Carol. 2019. Clinical Supervisor, Family Support Program, Family Dynamics. March 27.
- Bourbonniere, Mitch. 2019. Community Worker, LRSD. April 10.
- Brown, Melissa. 2019. Family Outreach Coordinator, LRSD. May 7.
- Cormack, Darcy. 2019. Principal, Lavallee School. January 11 and April 15.
- Embleton, Joan. 2019. Director, EDGE Literacy Program. April 2.

- Falconer, Jordan. 2019. Principal, Victor Wyatt School. April 15.
- Fredrickson, Colleen. 2019. Lavallee School Family Centre. April 25.
- Grant, Nancy. 2019. Woodydell Family Centre, May 17.
- Gray, Loncen. 2019. Community Worker, Marlene Street Resource Centre. April 9.
- Ibrahim, Iftu. 2019. Executive Director, St Boniface/St Vital Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program. April 9.
- Johnston, Louise. 2019. Vice-Chairperson. LRSD. May 2.
- Kolt, Joanne. 2019. Victor Mager Family Centre. April 25, 2019.
- Konkin, Angela. 2019. Executive Director, Marlene Street Resource Centre. April 9.
- Michalik, Christian. 2019. Superintendent. LRSD. April X.
- Nemeth, Sandy. 2019. Chairperson. LRSD. May 2.
- Nordheim, Irene. 2019. Assistant Superintendent. LRSD. April 18.
- Papagiannopoulos, Toulia. 2019. Director, English as an Additional Language Program, EDGE. April 2.
- Reinhardt, Troy. 2019. Principal, Victor Mager School. April 16.
- Ryan, Carolyn. 2019. Acting Chief Operating Officer, Manitoba Housing. March 27.
- Sanderson, Jan. 2019. Research Chair, Red River College and former Deputy Minister of Children and Youth Opportunities, Province of Manitoba. April 2.
- Scales, Victoria. 2019. Settlement Worker. St Boniface/St Vital Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program. April 9.
- Siddiqui, Saima. Community Worker, Marlene Street Resource Centre. April 9.
- Simonavicius, Alex. 2019. Youth Worker, Rene Deleurme Centre Boys and Girls Club. March 29.
- Tilston-Jones, Toni. 2019. Executive Director, Youville Community Health Centre. Personal interview, March 26.
- Zheleva, Yana. 2019. Settlement Worker. St Boniface/St Vital Neighbourhood Immigrant Settlement Program. April 9.



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