

# Public school board focused on creating 'Culture of Caring'

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With schools across the district now halfway through the year, the director of education for the Rainy River District School Board says there's lots to celebrate and look forward to.

"I think we've accomplished a great deal, and we're just going to remain focused on our annual operational plan and strategic plan," Heather Campbell noted.

The board's 2018-19 annual operational plan is focused on a "Culture of Caring," where students experience a sense of belonging, an inclusive learning environment, and strong partnerships in support of student well-being.

There are two actions outlined in the plan for enhancing learning environments, with the first one being an increase in supports for student well-being with an emphasis on equity, inclusion, and mental health.

The second action is to embed indigenous history, culture, and perspective across the curriculum.

As well, lots of work has been "at the elbow" in "Lunch and Learns" and after-school programming to support the board's teachers, said Campbell.

The Techways program, where students learn how to repair bikes and develop skills in the trades, also has been a major success, she noted.

"That's another great program that we're really proud of," Campbell enthused.

Continuing on with the board's language strategy, which is in partnership with the Seven Generations Education Institute, has been a key area of focus, as well.

More than 200 pre-schoolers receive weekly Ojibwe immersion support and 17 books have been written to help pre-school, beginner, and intermediate language learners of all ages.

To help advance indigenous language learners' education even further, the local public board recently received approval for the development

of a Grade 12 university-level Ojibwe course that will be offered at FFHS this coming fall.

Since 1999, an Ojibwe language course has been offered through the RRDSB but it was taught as an "open course," so it never counted as a college or university credit for students in Grade 12.

Once the program starts, "We will be the only [school] in the province to have a course like that at the Grade 12 university level," Campbell said.

"There's been nothing in place in our province to give it the recognition that other language courses have presently," she added.

To support board staff, the first system P.D. Day was held back in November for the first time in seven years that featured Dr. Greg Wells, author of the "Ripple Effect," which focuses on long-term strategies to enhance a person's well-being.

Wells also is a physiologist and researcher who works with high-performance Olympic athletes to study how a person can be at their peak performance.

"All staff were at FFHS for the P.D. Day and learned about how they can sleep better, eat better, and move better in order to perform better both personally and professionally," Campbell noted.

Students also are being better supported in their mental health and wellness through the employment of two brand-new full-time counsellors spread across the board's schools from Atikokan to Rainy River.

There now are four counsellors in total that work inside the board's schools daily through a partnership with the Kenora-Rainy River Children and Family Services.

"That's helping to reduce wait lists that exist outside of our board and certainly provides students with that in-time support," Campbell lauded.

Another accomplishment for the board has been the school climate surveys that were administered in partnership with the Northwestern Health Unit.

The surveys are meant to give the board a better understanding of students' well-being

by looking at their healthy eating habits, sleeping habits, physical activity, and screen time, which also helps inform the health unit on the district's youth.

"Your physical, mental, and emotional well-being . . . are so important and interrelated," Campbell remarked. "So it's important that we have a good sense of what we can do to support our students overall."

They can't perform well academically when their basic needs aren't being met, she stressed.

In terms of challenges so far this school year, Campbell said there have been some issues with respect to funding uncertainties, shortage of supply staff, release time for teachers, and having casual staff.

As well, the change in provincial government had resulted in a line by line audit of the public board and a subsequent delay for some funding, which provided additional obstacles, she added.

"We've now moved through that and we're always very careful with our budget and our spending, so we still have not had anything negatively impact the classroom," she noted.

Moving forward, Campbell intends to keep the board's focus on providing innovative programming for its students and continuing with the board's annual operational plan so students can find success both now and in the future.

She would like to send her deepest appreciation to the board staff and is incredibly grateful for the work they do each day across the system to support students.

"Whether you're in maintenance or an education support personal or a speech pathologist, whatever your role, you are all working for the same thing, which is to provide students with the best education possible to enhance their well-being and achievement," Campbell said.

"We have a really dedicated and committed passionate staff and I'm very fortunate every day to work in this board," she added.



Fort High Grade 7 students Jace Carlson and Hayden Beckett drilled holes into triangle-shaped pieces of wood to create a pegboard game on Friday during the carpentry portion of the "Techways" program. It began with fixing bicycles, as well as teaching about bike mechanics, to help get more students interested in the trades.

—Submitted photo