

Schools Matter: Creating a Culture of Learning

As students go back to school, there are many emotions – from sadness about the end of summer, to excitement about the next grade or a new teacher, and being back with friends in that often important routine.

There are seven school districts in the Columbia Basin-Boundary region, hosting over 100 rural schools of different stripes, each with unique programs and opportunities for the range of children and youth in our communities.

“Schools play an integral role in the community”, says Mike Hooker, Superintendent of School District 19, Revelstoke.

“School is not just about teaching subjects. The focus on overall health and well-being of students is becoming more widely understood as the key to health and success, whether the measures are in the areas of literacy and numeracy or social and emotional development. Without health and well-being, the potential of our learners can't be attained”.



Beyond the regular school day, many schools house early learning programs such as Strong Start and pre-school, as well as host adult education and recreation opportunities. High schools across the province are creating spaces for what used to be considered “outside agencies” to bring services and programs to students in schools. In Revelstoke, for example, youth services allow students to access leadership opportunities through the Youth Initiative Coordinator, counselling services with Community Connections staff, and sexual health information from the OPT Clinic nursing staff.

Embedded in community, innovative collaborations are common, often with local non-profit organizations. In Invermere, the Groundswell Network Society worked in partnership with David Thompson Secondary School to develop the Community Greenhouse and Gardens, which continues to offer applied sustainable living programs for students. Similarly, Harvest Festival happens this month in New Denver, where Lucerne Elementary Secondary School hosts this annual community event in partnership with the Healthy Community Society, which includes workshops, zucchini boat races, and a giant pot of “stone soup”.

Our post-secondary institutions are also rooted in community, contributing service and support. An integral element of Selkirk College's Nursing Program is the community nursing practice experience, where students work with local partner agencies to help people in the community who may be dealing with issues of housing insecurity, addictions and untreated mental illness. This is a unique opportunity

for students to develop their nursing skills and knowledge of the social factors that shape health on the streets of Nelson.

While schools across our region, and throughout the province, have faced declining enrollment and funding challenges, many have persevered, often through innovation and strong community support. Some are starting to market our schools internationally, drawing more students and thus added revenue. At least six schools are threatened with closure in our region, and according to the [British Columbia Teachers Federation's school closure data](#), 31 schools have been closed across six of the seven districts (no data for School District 51 Boundary) since 2002. School District 8 Kootenay Lake was a hot topic of conversation last spring with the threatened closure of WE Graham Community School in Slocan and Winlaw Elementary. Local residents organized, and with community outcry and finally the [Rural Education Enhancement Fund](#), both schools were saved from closure, at least for this year.

Having a school in a small community is important to the health and vibrancy of the place. It is a significant asset that can contribute to the attraction and retention of families and full-time residents. One of the RDI's applied research projects that begins this fall is on [asset-based rural development](#), where communities develop and execute a place-specific plan to link and leverage local assets in order to attract and retain new residents, workers, and investors. Schools can be a major asset in the community development process.

When looking at the research and statistics, a positive aspect of our rural schools is that class sizes are small. The BC Ministry of Education provides statistics about average class sizes across the province, and for our region, average class sizes are consistently smaller across all seven districts compared to the provincial average. Smaller class sizes can mean better learning conditions and higher student achievement, especially for younger children and disadvantaged students.

Schools in our region are also responding to the needs and interests of students who may succeed better at home or through distance learning, such as with distributed learning programs like the [Kootenay Discovery School](#) and the [Arrow Lakes Distributed Learning School](#). These programs follow the BC curriculum, with full support for students and parents from certified teachers.

Students also have opportunities for hands-on learning in our exceptional natural environment, such as through outdoor adventure programs like [ATLAS](#) or the [Valhalla Wilderness Program](#), as well as opportunities to learn within our vibrant cultural sector, such as through the [ArtStarts Creative Spark](#) program which supports artists engaging young people in schools and communities in arts-based projects. Schools and non-profits are offering a variety special programs that combine project based and experiential learning with core academic subjects.

Our region also benefits from region wide initiatives like the [Columbia Basin Environmental Education Network](#) (CBEEN), which this year offered a Leadership Clinic that brought together school district teams to share challenges and ideas, and collaborate around place-based education. "Through networking, team building and capacity-building, the teams set goals and designed action plans to support implementation of the redesigned curriculum", said Duncan Whittick, Executive Director of CBEEN. "Teachers, principals, superintendents, all came together, learning with and from each other, creating a culture of collaboration – not only within the school and district, but across districts".

With these many positive attributes, many of our school districts see above average high school completion rates. Revelstoke consistently shows higher completion rates than the provincial level, along with Boundary and Arrow Lakes districts for eight of the last nine years. Several school years show exceptionally high completion rates such as 97.9% in Revelstoke in 2009/10 and 96.8% in Arrow Lakes last year. A contributing factor to these high rates of success may be the small school environments that nurture the connections and relationships that are so important to individual success.

Education is a key social determinant of health. High school completion is important to ensure that citizens have the skills to participate actively in society, and is now the minimum education level for most employment options, and a critical foundation for positive work place conditions, future employment success, and overall well-being.

RDI will be reporting on several education and learning indicators, as well as subjective well-being indicators from our annual poll of residents, in this year's State of the Basin Snapshot Report, and Education & Learning Trends Analysis Brief to be released later this fall.

Resources

- Ballantine, J.H and Spade, J.Z. (eds). (2015). *Schools and Society: A Sociological Approach to Education*. Fifth Edition. California: SAGE Publications.
- BC Ministry of Education. School District Reports.
<http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/reporting/district.php>.
- Public Health Agency of Canada. (2013). *What Makes Canadians Healthy or Unhealthy?* Retrieved March 17, 2013, from Public Health Agency of Canada: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/ph-sp/determinants/determinants-eng.php>.
- Mikkonen, J., & Raphael, D. (2010). *Social Determinants of Health: The Canadian Facts*. Toronto: York University School of Health Policy and management.

Photo Credit: Terri MacDonald

UPCOMING...

The State of Rural Canada webinar is hosted by the *Rural Policy Learning Commons* and *Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation* on Tuesday, **September 20**.

This panel discussion brings together rural research experts from across Canada.

Please [register](#) to participate.

DID YOU KNOW?

With external review support from Kootenay Rockies Tourism, the RDI is pleased to release the Regional Tourism Business Retention and Expansion research report. The report details findings from interviews with 152 tourism businesses from across the Columbia Basin-Boundary region conducted between 2012 and 2016.



cbrdi.ca

 SUBSCRIBE

 FORWARD

[About Us](#)

[Communities](#)

[Research Areas](#)

[Resources](#)

[Contact Us](#)

RDI Focus is a monthly e-blast highlighting stories of well-being in our region. You are receiving this email because you have attended an RDI event or have subscribed to receive updates on RDI.

Edit your subscription | Unsubscribe instantly