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# REPORT

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## **System-Program/Curriculum Success**

### **Achievement and Engagement in Alternative Education**

# Rainy River District School Board System-Program/Curriculum Success

## Engagement and Achievement in Alternative Education

**Date:** March 5, 2024  
**To:** Rainy River District School Board of Trustees  
**From:** Jen Leishman, Principal of Alternative Education  
**Recommendations:** *This report is for information only.*

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### STRATEGIC DIRECTION

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#### A Culture of Caring:

- our students and staff experience a sense of belonging in safe, caring environments that will encourage their well-being and mental health.
- we build supportive relationships with students to deliver equitable and inclusive learning experiences.
- we work with families, partners, and communities in mutually respectful and productive relationships to enhance the success of all students.

#### A Culture of Lifelong Learning:

- our students pursue pathways that reflect their individual interests and needs building their skills for the future.
- we support our students through high expectations in teaching and learning.
- we recognize, respect, and honour the experiences of student and families, to provide learning opportunities that are culturally relevant and responsive to students' needs.

Alternative education for students is designed around incorporating culturally appropriate curriculum into everyday learning while designing/implementing content centered around students' interests and pathway planning. Monitoring students' attendance, work completion and well-being are key components for success in an alternative educational setting.

For students to embrace the end goal of academic achievement, they must be engaged, respected, see the value of their education, as well as see themselves in the curriculum content. When students are involved in setting goals (both short and long term), they become confident and independent learners and embrace the opportunities available in their secondary pathway.

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### CONTEXT

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The United Native Friendship Centre (UNFC) Alternative Secondary School Program allows students to attend an alternative classroom outside of the Fort Frances High School, where students experience smaller class sizes and flexible scheduling. They have access to supports within the building, including food security, Apatisiwin Employment Services, and Mental Health and Wellness programming. This Program has demonstrated success over time in its graduation rates:

- 2023: Under 18 – 12 students and Over 18 – 16 students
- 2022: Under 18 – 13 students and Over 18 – 11 students
- 2021: Under 18 – 14 students and Over 18 – 5 students

Alternative Education programming also allows for creative program planning and increased opportunities for hands-on experiential learning. Students at UNFC recently participated in a *Healthy Living Course* (PPZ3C) taught

by one of the teachers on site. Students were actively engaged in a wide range of learning activities including planning and implementing a fitness program, participating in healthy cooking, and receiving traditional teachings. They obtained certifications in both CPR/First Aid and Safe Food Handling. This course has been shared with Rainy River High School and Northern Lakes for future use.

A second course titled *Land Based Learning* is set to start in March 2024, for students attending UNFC and for the other secondary schools in the future. In this course, students will have the opportunity to learn about First Nation, Métis, and Inuit cultures and traditions, as well as complete a variety of certifications, both online and in person. Students can choose the activities in which they would like to participate and design their own course. Some components of the course include trapping, tree identification, Hunter/Boater Safety course, birch bark harvesting, rendering bear fat, and an Ice Safety/Rescue Certification. Again, this course will be shared with the other secondary schools within the RRDSB.

As engagement is key to student success, an online course is being created through School Support Services entitled, "The Learning Hub," where students can create their own course based on areas of interest from a range of modules. Students work through the modules, with ongoing feedback from their teacher; at the end of each module, there is a culminating task to ensure understanding of the content. These modules are engaging and are designed to support Pathway Planning for all students. Students complete four modules with assessment and evaluation monitored by a classroom teacher to achieve a credit.

Students are participating in Connected North's engaging real-time video conferencing and virtual field trip opportunities, which offer tremendous learning experiences and are chosen based on the interest of the students. To date, 70 students attended UNFC, either part-time or full-time during the first semester, with 106 credits granted to date.

There are several reasons why some young people leave school early.

- Some leave school for family reasons: they may lack parental support, act as caregivers in their family, or be parents themselves.
- Some leave for economic reasons: they may be living independently and must work to support themselves and/or their children.
- Others leave school for personal reasons: they may have behavioural problems, poor mental health, or problems with substance abuse; they may have had disagreements with individuals in authority or conflicts with the law; or they may have medical problems that have required treatment that interrupts their education.
- Still others leave for reasons related to their experience of school itself: they may not be succeeding academically, they may be bullied or may feel that they do not fit in, or they may have been absent for an extended time and find re-entry difficult.

Often these students have a personal goal of obtaining credits and graduating, but many find it exceedingly difficult to do so. Some may wish to continue learning, but not in a school setting. Alternative education settings often successfully meet the needs of many of these students. However, a small percentage of students require a uniquely individualized program, Supervised Alternative Learning (SAL), if they are to stay connected and achieve an Ontario Secondary School Diploma from their secondary school education.

SAL is available to students who, for a variety of reasons, are not meeting with success in a regular classroom and require a creative learning plan to keep them still connected to school and learning. The students combine attending school and learning from home or working. Students have success in SAL programming when there is consistent monitoring from the school staff, with attendance counsellors and school staff working as a team with parents/guardians.

When students returned to school after the pandemic, many found themselves struggling with attending classes, engaging in course content, and identifying supports available to address mental health challenges. Our goal is to decrease the number of students on SAL (Supervised Alternative Learning) by providing engaging course content and creating a safe space for students, so they are more comfortably able to transition from working at home into either an alternative setting or return to their designated high school. For those that remain working from home, the goal is to graduate within a 4- or 5-year plan from their initial Grade 9 year. Last year, there were 97 SAL plans developed for students. Currently, there are 43 students from RRDSB (Grades 9-12) are on a SAL program:

- Grade 9 and 10: 16 students
- Grade 11: 11 out of 15 students are on track to graduate with a 4 or 5-year plan.
- Grade 12: 9 out of 12 students are on track to graduate with a 4 or 5-year plan.

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## **SUMMARY**

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Attendance, engagement, academic achievement, and well-being are areas of focus for students in alternative education. For students to be successful, differentiated platforms of curriculum and teaching methods are required. Student success is grounded in a student's need to feel a sense of belonging. The setting of Alternative Education programming allows for more one-to-one support for students, helping to build relationships with students, to increase their confidence, and to realize they can achieve any goal that they set for themselves.

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## **ROUTING**

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RRDSB Board of Trustees    March 5, 2024