



Invoking the Village:

Enhancing Collaboration Between Schools and Community Agencies To Support Newcomers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Thank you to the following contributing organizations:

- ASSIST Community Services
- Boys & Girls Club Big Brothers Big Sisters of Edmonton
- Edmonton Immigrant Services Association (EISA)
- Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN)
- EmployAbilities for Newcomers
- Francophonie Albertaine Plurielle (FRAP)
- Multicultural Family Resource Society (MFRS)
- Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op (MCHB)
- Somali Canadian Women & Children Association (SCWCA)
- Action for Healthy Communities (AHC)
- REACH Edmonton

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INVOKING THE VILLAGE

The majority of our mental load and emotional labor as modern-day mothers comes from constantly and creatively trying to piece together some semblance of a village, stepping into roles meant to be filled by other village members, and unconsciously grieving this soul-crushing loss (which is hidden in plain site). We hugely underestimate the weight of villagelessness on mothers.

- Beth Barry @Revolutionfromhome

We are familiar with the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child. And yet, this is more than a quaint proverb. It represents an archetype of collectivism (Hammond, 2015) that shapes many countries in the world, and is consistent with the way our brains are wired to live in community. In a village, we know each other, and we all contribute our gifts for the betterment of each person in the community.

North American culture, with our big cities, more often operates within an archetype of individualism (Hammond, 2015). This leaves us striving to do our best to prove ourselves, to demonstrate that we are independent and capable of creating the life we want on our own. This translates to many areas of life—to how we perceive families, teachers, students and workers. We expect the family unit to be self-sufficient—to meet all the needs of their children. We expect teachers to meet the needs of diverse students on their own. We expect students to show up in school, at grade level, ready to engage. We expect workers to always show up, to fulfill all expectations. We expect women to carry the burden of necessary care, with limited or no pay. And we expect leaders to be superheroes, all-knowing, all-seeing, and capable of maintaining order and routine for those in their care. In “normal” times, in limited circumstances, some of us have been able to maintain this façade, to the detriment of the whole.



This is also reflected in a systemic silo mentality. In government we separate policy and funding into Children's Services, Education, and Advanced Education, based on age. Health is separate from Community and Social Services, and Housing. Jobs, Economy and Innovation are enacted separately from Environment and Parks, and Infrastructure. We have policy and legislation that defines how we share and protect information—FOIPP and PIPA. In schools we separate learning by subject area into Math, Science, Social Studies and Language Arts. We teach and assess individual children on topics as if they were separate entities. These separations do not serve us when we are trying to educate and support human beings with diverse journeys, and unique expressions of intellectual, social, emotional and physical strengths and needs.

It is no wonder that in an individualistic culture with siloed systems that collaboration is difficult. As families and teachers, we have all been shaped by this expectation that we manage alone, that we face diverse needs and expectations with just our own limited resources. The system was designed to make it so. And yet, we have pockets of effective collaboration that show us what is possible when open to each other and name our strengths and challenges. When we articulate them, we can dismantle barriers, imagine possibilities and find new ways of living and learning together. They say necessity is the mother of invention. Complexity and crisis can now be the mother of collaboration.

In the Edmonton Local Immigration Partnership (ELIP), people and agencies come together to share ideas, resources, and research to bring opportunities to fruition in our community. With representatives from different levels of government, various organizations and community agencies, we have been facing this pandemic as a community to make visible the challenges of newcomers, and to amplify the impact of support. At the Education Table hosted by ELIP, we have been exploring ways to weave a web of support around newcomer families, through services offered in the context of school.



The pandemic has challenged the perception that any of us can make it on our own. It has shown the cracks in a system that was designed to keep us separate, to protect information, to prioritize privacy over support. The separation from extended family, childcare, schools, personal care and support services has been devastating to so many. And while we have amplified our use of technology to operate virtually, we all long for the power of human touch, connection, and conversation: face to face, and heart to heart. We all see how much we need the gifts of the community: music, art, recreation, learning opportunities, support.

This is even more true for newcomer families, who face layers of barriers to participation and long-term integration into the community: language, poverty, limited space, trauma, limited knowledge of systems, just to name a few. Immigrants also bring riches of wisdom and strength from their languages, cultures, and ways of cultivating community. We have so much to learn from each other when we create space for conversation, shared experiences, and empathy.

Schools are an essential site of welcome, education, and integration. Within them we have the power to heal and support, to educate and empower, to nurture bright futures for all. We can only create equitable outcomes, when we have a continuum of supports available to students with diverse needs. This work is too big for individual teachers, schools, or agencies to do on their own. This report is an invitation to educators and community agencies to share their contributions, identify challenges, dismantle barriers, and work together at every level of the system to create a community that enhances life for everyone.

Respectfully,

Dr. Kathy Toogood
Educator, researcher, community member

*If you have come to help me,
you are wasting your time,
but if you have come because your
liberation is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.*

- Lila Watson, Indigenous Australian Artist,
activist, and academic

CONTEXT



This project was born out of conversation at the Edmonton Local Immigration Partnership (ELIP) Education Table. Starting in May 2020, people gathered from the Edmonton Public and Edmonton Catholic School Divisions, alongside staff from immigrant serving agencies to identify the unique challenges presented by COVID, to share the emergent work that their organizations were doing in response, and to identify opportunities for collaboration. In addition to responding to the emerging needs, the participants at the Education Table decided to conduct exploratory research as a means of imagining a way forward to better outcomes for newcomer students and families through enhanced collaboration between schools and community agencies.

The table decided to start the process with some qualitative research, by engaging community partners in focus group conversations. School board employees were not able to participate without a full ethics review and approval conducted by the school division, which can take some time. Four two-hour focus group conversations were held between February 23 and March 2, 2021. Overall, there were 35 participants, representing the following 9 agencies in the Edmonton area:

- ASSIST Community Services
- Boys & Girls Clubs Big Brothers Big Sisters of Edmonton & area (BGCBIGS)
- Edmonton Immigrant Services Association (EISA)
- Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers (EMCN)
- EmployAbilities
- Francophonie Albertaine Plurielle (FRAP)
- Multicultural Family Resource Society (MFRS)
- Multicultural Health Brokers (MCHB)
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LITERATURE REVIEW

The full report contains a review of the literature, the insights from the focus group conversations, and a vision of a preferred future. The research material gathered is intended to be used by educators and community agencies to build a shared understanding of immigrant experiences, and to explore possibilities for deeper partnership and collaboration in service of newcomers. This research explores one specific aspect of work in the settlement sector in Edmonton: collaboration between schools and community agencies. It should be considered alongside other research done in Edmonton, including Lessons from the influx: How Edmonton welcomed refugees from Syria (Edmonton Chamber of Voluntary Organizations (ECVO), 2019). It is our hope that the report stimulates conversation and new possibilities for working together in service of students and families who are newcomers.

From the selected review of the literature, there was evidence that schools play a significant role in the academic and social integration of refugee students and families. Collaboration with settlement workers in schools (SWIS), as well as other community partners has often played a role in supporting communication with families, enhancing intercultural understanding and providing holistic supports for refugee students and families. When school staff deepen their understanding of the experiences of newcomer students and families, and are able to communicate with students and families, they are better able to create safe, welcoming, and caring learning environments, that allow students to thrive. Leadership is key in building trusting relationships that support a mutually beneficial partnership in service of shared goals. The approach we take, and the protective factors we build in can make all the difference in supporting healthy integration.

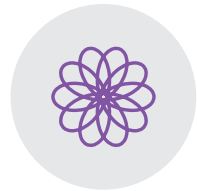
CONTRIBUTIONS OF COMMUNITY PARTNERS



**Timely
Communication**



**Academic
Support**



**Holistic
Support**



**Supporting Specialized
Assessment And Class
Placement**



**Navigating
Systems**



**Training In Intercultural
Understanding And Trauma
Sensitivity**



Advocacy



**Interagency
Collaboration**

Participating in the focus groups were partners from different types of agencies and with various roles. Community partners included:

- Settlement Workers in Schools (SWIS)
- Enhanced Settlement Workers in Schools (ESWIS)
- Cultural Brokers
- Out of School Time (OST) program providers

The invitation to participate included a list of the types of support that community agencies can provide, developed from an initial review of the literature. The community partners affirmed the items on the list and told stories or other specific situations that they had been instrumental in navigating. Review of the data suggests several overarching categories of contribution made by community partners.

SYSTEMIC GAPS AND BARRIERS

While recognizing the work of so many educators and community partners in serving newcomers, the stories of practice also revealed many systemic gaps and barriers that were impacting newcomers' experiences of school and learning. The gaps noted were brought up in more than one focus group discussion, with examples provided from different participants.

In the full report, the following systemic gaps and barriers are summarized and illuminated with quotes from focus group participants:



**Long Road
To Integration**



**Inconsistent Service
And Support**



Consent



**Understanding Family Background, Lack Of Intercultural Understanding
Context, And Trauma**



And Competence



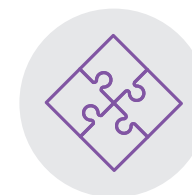
**Racism
And Discrimination**



**Support For Late Arrivals With
Limited Or Interrupted Formal
Schooling**



**Commitment To Including
Immigrant Families**



**Layers Of Support For
Students And Families With
Complex Needs**



**Insufficient Funding And
Resources**

COVID-19

It is not an understatement to say that COVID changed everything. The work of community partners is based on relationship, on individualized and small group service and support. When COVID hit and schools closed, this person-to-person communication and support was interrupted.

Many community organizations pivoted in their focus. COVID amplified the gaps in society between those with space, technology, and jobs they could do from home, and families in small homes, with several students, limited or no technology, and unstable employment. Food security and enhancing technology access became emergent priorities. Clear communication of health information was essential and challenging to access in different languages.

Community agencies offering OST programming were not able to offer programs in the ways they had previously. Some agencies pivoted to offer different support. In some cases, they found innovative ways to achieve the goals of their programming online. If they did figure out a way to offer summer and fall programming in person, they were serving far fewer students at a time, due to distancing guidelines.

This research was conducted in the spring of 2021, during the third wave of the pandemic, as vaccinations were starting to be distributed in priority order. Schools and community organizations continue to respond to the spread of the virus, and changing guidelines, seeking innovative ways to support students and newcomers while remaining healthy.

MOVING FORWARD

How can we create an education system that is responsive to the holistic human needs of students? What actions need to be taken at every level so that the system can address diverse learning needs, rather than expecting children to fit a rigid system? If indeed we believe that relationships are critical for children to feel safe and learn, then our policies and practices need to be designed to support relationships between students, teacher, families and community. Such a system would benefit all students, including newcomers and those with complex needs. The work of community partners is relational, and so are their suggestions for change.

1. Recognize cultural and personal strength
2. Embrace research and storytelling
3. Convene the community
4. Engage in two-way dialogue and intercultural learning opportunities
5. Mobilize together



PREFERRED FUTURE

After describing the kinds of service they provide, the gaps in the system, and the barriers that newcomers face settling into Canada, community partners were asked to dream about a preferred future. “If you could wave a magic wand, and improve service to students, what would that look like? The magic wand question is helpful because it can help us think beyond current limitations, which can then support practical solutions. The participants painted a picture of their preferred future described under the following themes:

- School building as community hub
- Humanistic and holistic approach to support
- Proactive and sufficient support for thriving
- Deep unhindered collaboration
- Systemic commitment to equity and accountability

We imagine schools as open and welcoming places for parents and community agencies. We imagine spaces where newcomer and Canadian parents can gather to have coffee or tea with the principal or meet with community partners. When the physical building is open and holds space for parents, then they can deepen their understanding of what their children are learning and deepen their family connection. Regular presence in the school can enhance relationships amongst parents, staff and community partners such that small issues are solved in positive ways by providing support, rather than leading to bigger problems born of misunderstanding. Newcomers could receive support from settlement workers in navigating other systems and learning their way forward to integration and interdependence.

We imagine schools as a place where newcomers are seen as complete human beings, with strengths and needs: physical, emotional, and social, as well as intellectual. We want our children’s academic progress to be seen in a context of overall wellbeing, so that school is also a place of healing from trauma, being nourished physically, emotionally and socially. Students are focused and engaged in learning, as they feel safe and cared for, and understand the expectations in their language. When students are dysregulated or make mistakes, we invoke the power of restorative practices to support learning and deepen community, rather than resorting to punishment. With after-school programs providing tutoring, recreation, leadership development, social connection and learning opportunities outside school curriculum, students can thrive and develop in multiple ways.

We imagine a world where there are adequate, proactive supports in place for thriving. Although newcomers expect a certain degree of struggle in settling into a new country, how wonderful it would be if they could move from dependence to interdependence without being in crisis and living on the edge of survival for years. It would be a game-changer if they had enough money to provide for their families, learn the language in a timely manner, and gain the knowledge they need to navigate systems and gain meaningful employment. This would reduce the overall cost to the system, as well as reduce suffering for newcomers, and allow them to create their preferred life after all the hardship they have already overcome prior to their migration.

All families would have the time and resources they need to learn and thrive. Families would have computers and access to the internet to support education, communication, accessing information for health, employment, and overall wellbeing. Students would be accurately assessed and able to progress in a timely way through the system. High school students would get the language support they need, as well as guidance to map out a career path in line with their strengths and interests. They would be funded to finish high school, rather than running out of time at age 20. Students with extra learning challenges would have the individualized support they need to progress and maximize their learning and contribution.

As community partners, we imagine a world of unhindered collaboration. We see possibility when we are all at the table: settlement workers, community partners, teachers, principals, ESL and Intercultural consultants, and system leaders to promote deep understanding of the family situations and student needs. Together, we could create innovative solutions that maximize our resources in service of students and families. Together we would see newcomers build their capacity to learn the language. Together we would create a culture of continuous improvement. Together we would identify and dismantle systemic barriers and build more equitable systems where newcomers are present and visible in all staff groups as role models for students. Together, we would be accountable to the community for the holistic success and wellbeing of all students.

While we acknowledge that such a world would be enhanced by more government funding, we also recognize the power of relationships, communication, and sitting together at the table to remove barriers and imagine innovative options for improved outcomes. We look forward to working and learning with all who are committed to an equitable world where schools are the heart of the community, and education is the path to thriving for all people.

