

TARGETED
ENGAGEMENT on
POVERTY and
EDUCATION

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CONSULTANT REPORT

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Project Overview

The Manitoba Commission for Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education recommended many key action items for an improved education system to support student success and well-being. The Manitoba government has committed to implementing many of these recommendations, including the establishment of the Poverty and Education Task Force, launched in September 2021.

To better understand and combat the impacts of poverty on education in Manitoba, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning engaged in a comprehensive engagement process between April 1 and August 31, 2022, to gather feedback from stakeholders within school divisions, schools, government departments, families, students, child welfare agencies, and not-for-profit organizations. The goal of this report is to summarize the central themes on poverty and education referenced by student community voices that were heard throughout the consultation process.

Boivin Communication Group Inc. led the consultations outlined in this report, with technical support provided by the project team with Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning. We thank Michelle Boivin, Rebecca Chartrand, and Ben Carr for their leadership and facilitation to ensure voices from across Manitoba inform the recommendations of the Poverty and Education Task Force.

Engagement Overview

This report captures engagement that took place between April 1 and August 31, 2022. This included both in-person, community-based consultation sessions and online stakeholder panel sessions (see [Appendix A](#)) to gather feedback and recommendations for strategies and actions related to reducing the impact of poverty on education. In addition, a survey on poverty and education was distributed to all high schools across Manitoba.

It is important to note that a unique component of this consultation involved direct engagement with Manitoba students inside their own communities. Their thoughts and feelings were captured authentically during facilitated conversations, providing a meaningful perspective that is critical to understanding the context of this initiative. Their stories are reflected in this report, and it is their voices that are central to telling the story.

What We Heard

Several main themes emerged out of the feedback given by participants. Participants across all touch points throughout this process were united in their observations that there is **a deep relationship between health outcomes, school success, socio-economic status, and overall quality of life.**



Online Stakeholder Panel Sessions

This engagement included panels of leaders with experience and knowledge relative to poverty and specific subject-matter expertise, such as children in care, food access, Indigenous learners, socio-economic barriers to participation in education, and intersectionality across community programs and agencies and government departments. Please see [Appendix A](#) for the organizations that participated in the panel sessions and [Appendix B](#) for the questions that were used to guide the conversation during these discussions.

Key themes were as follows:

► **Intersectionality across Community and Agency Programs**

Woven throughout this discussion were reminders of the importance of interconnectedness—not just the need for agencies, governments, and schools to work together, but for partnerships that enable decision makers to see health, education, food security, child welfare, and reconciliation as an undeniably linked set of issues that must be tackled in unison for successful outcomes to be attained. Although all panels had members with certain expertise who drew on specific themes that focused their conversations, the interconnectedness of all areas was apparent throughout each panel discussion, accounting for some of the crossover found in the summaries below.

Stakeholders discussed the myriad ways in which schools have found success in supporting the needs of children, including after-school programs, universal lunch and breakfast programs, culturally relevant curriculum, diverse hiring practices, and equity lenses. Despite all of the ways in which schools are leveraging their resources to bring families and children into the heart of the support network, there are many services that they are not equipped to provide. This has a direct impact on student learning, while perpetuating the challenges that are often faced by those who are experiencing poverty.

Families could benefit from schools serving as “community hubs,” where there is access to supports such as addiction counsellors, tax clinics, income assistance agents, food programs, and mental health professionals. When discussing ways in which the system could be improved by leveraging school space and knowledge in combination with community resources, one stakeholder made the following remark:

“In the school system, the same thing with red tape happens around access to mental health support and counselling supports. Just the amount of paperwork that as a parent you need to do to prove that your child has a learning disability, for example, is overbearing.... I think we really need to cut down on the red tape and recognize the needs of the students and provide support in a timely manner.”

For many families, especially in newcomer and Indigenous communities, navigating the many layers of social service networks can be daunting and inaccessible due to such constraints as transportation, systemic racism, or a lack of culturally relevant services. Centralizing services in locations where trust and familiarity are more firmly established—such as in schools—can mitigate some of the barriers and disincentives that prevent families from accessing needed support during the school day.

Stakeholders noted that in order to combat these challenges of poverty there will need to be a continued focus on sustainable food development and associated lessons within curriculum, inclusion of culturally relevant food choices, and universal meal programs in schools.

Manitoba has a high number of northern remote communities, which creates unique obstacles that contribute to poverty. The lack of access to high-speed, affordable Internet in many regions leaves children and their families more isolated and at a greater disadvantage than children in other parts of the province.

There is a need for greater representation of minority communities across all leadership positions in schools, government departments, not-for-profit agencies, the justice system, and health care facilities. It is important for children in particular to see themselves reflected in the fabric of these institutions that seek to establish trust, as they interact with them regularly. One stakeholder lamented the lack of diverse representation across systems and emphasized the need for it by stating,

“It’s so important to ask questions, such as ‘Does your teacher look like you if you’re a racialized or Indigenous student?’; ‘Does your principal look like you?’”

In addition, an emphasis on trauma-informed practices must become part of training for leaders in these critical sectors, with a strong focus on intergenerational trauma. To support this, the ongoing or increased presence of Elders is an effective way to begin engaging with the work.

There were specific comments about creating more hybrid learning opportunities, particularly related to nutrition and financial literacy. It is crucial, they said, to ensure that students see “real-life” value and meaning in their learning. By having Elders present in schools, connecting meal programs to sustainable food development and land-based learning, and increasing the number of “leaving to learn” experiences with a focus on such practical skills as financial literacy and workforce skill development, schools can work towards greater success through student engagement.

► Socio-Economic Barriers

Stakeholders discussed a number of issues that they have identified through firsthand experiences working with schools, children, and families to be substantial obstacles to healthy, safe, and effective learning. Recurring themes throughout the discussion included the need for stable, year-over-year funding for organizations so they can plan more effectively while focusing efforts on program development rather than proposal writing.

The issue of transportation was raised frequently. Stakeholders recounted multiple stories that highlighted the challenges a parent living in poverty can face, and how they affect their child. One member referenced a mother who would have to bus their youngest child to daycare, bus back to walk their other children to school, work a shift, and then bus back to daycare and the school, while also needing to account for lunch plans for the school-aged kids. For students with a long way to go to get to school, variables such as winter conditions, fuel prices, bus costs, and access to affordable modes of transportation serve as frequent disincentives for school attendance.

All stakeholders referenced the need for affordable and accessible childcare. Several stakeholders spoke positively of the new childcare deal between the federal and provincial governments and emphasized the need to ensure that early childhood educators are well compensated for their work so there is more long-term stability.

According to the stakeholders, a major barrier facing youth in care—particularly those from Indigenous communities—is the fact that, through a process known as “aging out,” when they turn age 18, they are left without the support they need to enter legal adulthood, including access to housing. In order to ensure that youth can focus on school and on their overall well-being, greater predictability and support are critical to their success before and after they enter adulthood.

The stakeholders referenced a variety of programs that they believe have worked effectively over the years, largely as a result of the fact that they are “holistic” in nature—meaning they bring together key stakeholders from the community to support families and children. The primary reason that these programs were effective—and what they all share in common—is a leveraging of broader community support centred around families. Whether it be access to after-school programs, health care professionals, or tutors, each took a holistic approach to care for not just the child, but their primary caregivers as well.

► Children in Care

Stakeholders noted a variety of programs with which they were directly involved that are making a difference. Top of the list again was the significant benefit of having breakfast and lunch programs at school. These programs, in addition to providing nutritious meals for students, help to create a place of belonging while simultaneously reducing anxiety associated with going to school hungry. As noted previously, students are able to reach their full potential more easily when they are well fed.

One stakeholder spoke of programs that they are involved with in multiple school divisions and further described a during- and after-school support program that attaches students and their caregivers to a student parent support worker (SPSW) who connects with teachers, guidance counsellors, and administrators to ensure support is in place. They operate in spaces both within and outside of the school. Students are connected to tutors, given hot meals daily, and are eligible for money that goes towards post-secondary studies and personal items of need. Research on the program has shown that participants, over the four years they are involved, graduate at higher rates than children from similar socio-economic backgrounds who are not involved.

A program called Pathways works in partnership with the Community Education Development Association (CEDA) and local organizations, as well as schools. Currently, the program is located in five Middle Years schools and four high schools. Its goal is to help “break the cycle of poverty through education and creating long-term positive changes in community” (see CEDA’s *Pathways to Education* website at <https://pte.cedawpg.org>). The key to Pathways’ success can be found using a combination of academic, financial, social, and 1-1 supports.

The presence of Indigenous student groups and more visible curriculum in schools is contributing to a more inclusive and respectful environment for students in care than in past years. Specifically, the establishment of Indigenous-led student councils, Pow Wow clubs, language clubs, student-led smudging ceremonies, and inclusion of Indigenous student announcements over the PA were examples of how these changes could take shape. Elders in schools, language programs, cultural opportunities, land acknowledgements, and Treaty Days are all examples of ways in which schools are helping to support children in care, as well as informing entire communities about our history, different cultures, and paths forward in the spirit of truth and reconciliation.

The Boys and Girls Club of Winnipeg was mentioned as a powerful program whose impact on kids in care and those living in poverty has been monumental. One stakeholder spoke of a study completed by the organization that showed a direct correlation between the frequency of participation in the program and drastic improvements in academic performance, alongside reductions in negative interactions with the justice system. The organization tracked many students well into young adulthood and found that the benefits of the program lasted beyond their involvement—again proving its value through improved educational outcomes and fewer incidents related to justice.

A newer program that was raised by a stakeholder was a partnership between the Met schools in Seven Oaks School Division and the University of Winnipeg's Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies. It is a dual-credit program—meaning students get both a high school and post-secondary level credit upon successful completion—that is led by a social worker who uses the classroom for theoretical learning related to poverty and its wide-scale implications. This is facilitated by partnerships with local organizations that provide practical, real-world learning settings where students build relationships in the community and often subsequently find longer-term work. The program is open to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, but there is increasing interest on the part of Indigenous students year over year.

The COACH Program was referenced as effective but not widely available, as it is only present in a few schools and serves just 30 children. The program is described as “an intensive, year-long community-based treatment and academic program that provides emotional, behavioural and academic wraparound intervention and support for 30 boys and girls with profound emotional, behavioural and academic issues” (see “Child and Youth Programs” on the *Manitoba Healthy Child* website at www.gov.mb.ca/healthychild).

A major point of concern that was raised involved delays due to technicalities among children registering at schools in September. Often, these delays led to a month or more of learning loss. Also specific to school were the devastating impacts that children in care face when moving foster homes. Stakeholders agreed that children should be given the ability to choose whether they want to stay at their current school until June 30 or even beyond. This would reduce impacts on learning, anxiety, and a loss of that ever-important sense of belonging. In addition, all students in care should have a mentor who follows them regardless of changes to their foster circumstances. A lack of continuity in the key individuals tasked with supporting kids in care is an all-too-common contributor to mental health and academic struggles.

The number one issue highlighted by stakeholders during this session was related to funding. Many of the organizations that have found long-term success are not benefitting from stable, predictable, long-term funding. Schools, they noted, are asked to take on a significant degree of work to support students experiencing poverty, but the programs that often operate within them or alongside them are not able to sustain the viability of their efforts due to funding gaps. It was noted that one solution would be the dedication of an individual within various departments to be solely responsible for the evaluation and allocation of funding for these programs. The answers, they said, are out there, but the foundations on which they are built require more financial support to scale at levels that will cover a greater number of children in need.

A substantial challenge for youth in care continues to be access to necessary support once they “age out.” Although Agreements with Young Adults (AYA) exists to provide some support for permanent wards once they turn 18, stakeholders mentioned that the policies and criteria are often too strict and don’t allow for the type of flexibility needed when circumstances call for it, such as a mental health crisis or other medical event. Stakeholders recounted how some youth lost their support because they were dealing with setbacks, and they stated that the criteria are similar to probation and are in need of revisiting. Furthermore, it was noted that many children are not permanent wards of the state and therefore are ineligible to receive many supports, although they are often seriously needed. These observations led many to suggest—as have stakeholders on other panels—that support for youth who have been in care must extend beyond age 21. To further illustrate this point, one stakeholder remarked,

“For those that are aging out of care, housing is probably the biggest issue that they face. On the eve of your 18th birthday, you’re evicted from whatever supports you might have, because you’re 18 tomorrow. Yet there is this massive gap. For a lot of the youth aging out of care, it’s kind of like, well, you’re 18 now, so you should be able to manage on your own. And we see so many, so many failures (as a result), we just set them up to fail. We have those rigidities and those policies and procedures in place that serve systems and not people. We need to go back to ensuring that our systems are people-centred, not system-centred.”

► Food Access and Security

One of the most significant impacts of poverty on children and their families is the inability to access and consume healthy, affordable, and culturally relevant food. The stakeholders on this panel spoke favourably about a number of successful programs that currently exist. These programs include many school divisions where students, in addition to a variety of academic and social supports, are provided breakfast or a subsidized lunch program. According to one panel member who served as the lead between a food support organization and a Winnipeg school, the effect of the program has led to greater participation and attendance as a result of predictability around food security. One such example is a program at an elementary school in Winnipeg where all students get a bag of healthy foods every Friday afternoon. It has resulted in less anxiety, greater connection between families and schools, and higher attendance rates.

Nearly all stakeholders articulated that the success of these programs required the contributions of multiple community partners, ranging from local grocers, not-for-profit organizations, and Elders to government agencies. Another key component of successful meal programs is that they are universal. Stakeholders noted that this was critical to remove stigmatization that has historically kept many children in need of support from accessing it.

Throughout the discussion, the panel emphasized the need for a greater degree of interagency collaboration. Specifically, they referred to competing interests or structures that often interfere with the ability to deliver food-security support for children. They recommended that government, local agencies, schools, school boards, and willing partners such as local grocers meet in a coordinated effort to establish needs, services, and next steps.

A common theme raised by stakeholders was the need to help communities build capacity for sustainable food growth. Accompanying the need for access to food itself, a more sophisticated and comprehensive approach to food literacy and lifelong health habits related to nutrition is critical to providing children and their families with knowledge to make informed choices. Furthermore, foods that are culturally relevant must be a part of the conversation, particularly within Indigenous communities, to help foster a greater connection with community and to break away from colonial mindsets about food in western cultures.

► Indigenous Learners

Manitoba is home to the largest per-capita Indigenous population in Canada and the fastest growing demographic of youth among all Canadians. As a result of historic injustices, including the residential school system, systemic racism, and colonial structures, Indigenous Manitobans have suffered, and the challenges that many faced—vastly disproportionate to any other group in the province—continue to be felt and often manifest in the shape of poverty and all of its associated obstacles. If we are to find meaningful and effective solutions with regard to the impacts of poverty on education and to improving the lives of those experiencing poverty, we must focus a specific and large degree of attention towards the cultures, histories, and necessary supports required for Indigenous children in Manitoba.

In recent years, thanks in large part to enormous work done by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and all who participated to make it happen, Indigenous issues are better understood and reflected in our schools, and in society as a whole. Many of the areas in which there are successes related to Indigenous learners are right inside schools. On this panel, stakeholders highlighted the importance of including Indigenous cultures inside schools. This could include Pow Wow clubs, language programs, land acknowledgements, displays of the Seven Sacred Teachings, and Indigenous student-leadership groups. Furthermore, there has been an improvement in the number of staff who identify as Indigenous in Manitoba schools, but it is believed to still be well short of where it must be. All of these factors contribute to a greater sense of belonging for Indigenous students inside our schools.

One of the key successes that stakeholders discussed was the existence of summer programs. Summer learning loss can have a significant impact on student learning. Furthermore, schools are often the place where students feel safest, where they are surrounded by people who care for them, and where they are provided food (where possible), access to transportation, and social networks. Many students do not look forward to the summer break as it removes these supports from their lives. As such, summer programs that combine mentorship, play, culturally relevant learning, and meals are hugely important. Many of these programs exist across numerous school divisions in Manitoba, but stakeholders suggest more are needed, as they are not available to all students who require them and additional funding is required to relieve school divisions of the extra financial pressures they add.

The number of Indigenous language programs has increased over the past decade. There are multiple school divisions that offer bilingual Ojibwe language tracks in their schools—an accomplishment that stakeholders said is vital to reconciliation. However, an obvious gap exists in the absence of Indigenous language programs at the high school level, be they immersion programs or individual language courses. Changes to Manitoba's curriculum that allow for the inclusion and development of such courses would be a welcome and positive addition to successes in this area. In addition, many school courses and programs are focusing more holistically on education. Teaching about the vast diversity that exists within Indigenous communities across the province and country is helpful in showing young people that they have deeply planted roots that make them unique and special. Reclaiming language is vital to understanding one's identity, and the reclamation of identity is vital to the long-term health and well-being of the individual.

Many of the programs referenced earlier in this report mostly serve Indigenous youth. These programs, which stakeholders identified as helpful and healthy, are among the things that are working for Indigenous learners in Manitoba. The VOICES program was mentioned as one that has served Indigenous children in care well.

Stakeholders provided a variety of recommendations that they collectively felt would help to improve the lives of Indigenous learners in Manitoba, beginning with something we have heard before—stable funding. Without it, stakeholders said, the ability to rely on these programs year over year and to incorporate the metrics used to analyze their success is jeopardized. It is important that school divisions and not-for-profits have flexibility in their planning and that they don't spend a great deal of time chasing funding, which takes away from all of the other pressures they face.

An area that requires more focus is healthy living: in other words, not just holistic educational philosophies in curriculum, but an intentional and targeted focus on healthy eating. Providing educational materials on nutrition-related matters very early in school life is a proactive step that can be taken.

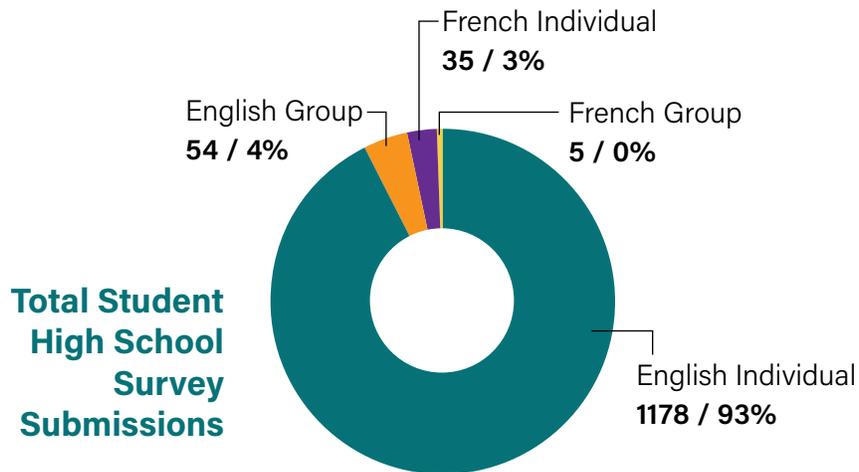
One stakeholder noted—and others agreed—that the role of community centres has been diminished. A thriving community centre, especially one located close to a school, can serve as a hub for all sorts of important supports such as sports, health services, meals, cultural activities, and safe spaces.

There was widespread agreement related to funding of post-secondary tuition, transportation, and school supplies (including electronic devices). Stakeholders noted that any child living in care, for instance, should be automatically granted free tuition and bus passes. As stated during the section on children in care, when youth age out of the system, they lose the vast majority of support. If they can be set up for success through programs and financial aid before they turn 18, they will be much better positioned for success as they navigate early adulthood.



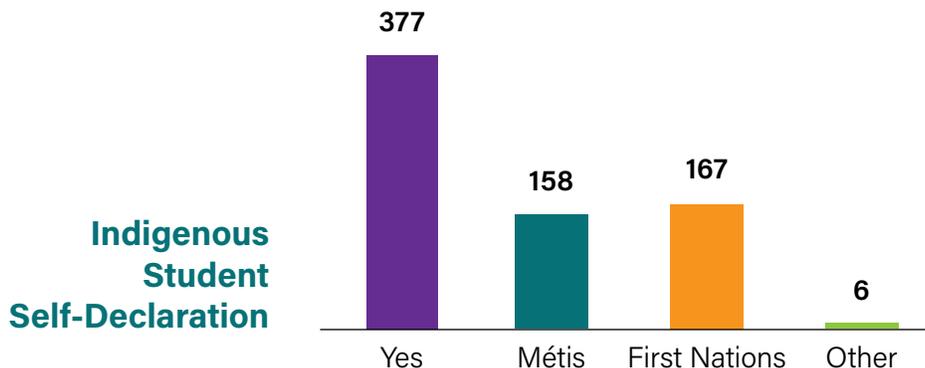
Student Survey

A student survey on poverty and education was sent to all high schools across Manitoba, and over 1600 students aged 14–21 from across the province responded. Participants represented many demographic identifiers, including gender, religion, Indigenous ancestry, income level, geography, age, children in care, and students from urban, rural, and northern settings.



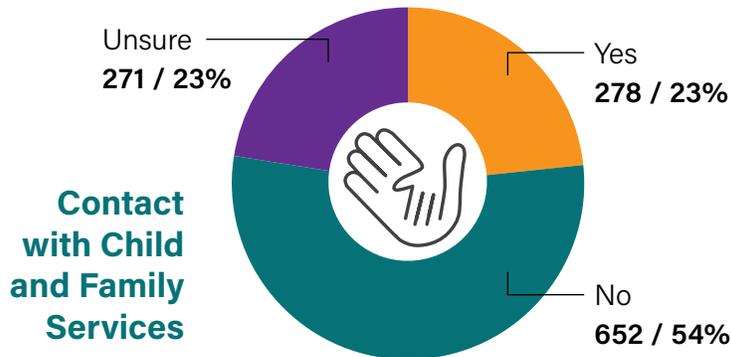
The following key statistics provide an overview of the results from the survey.

There were 377 students in total who self-declared as Indigenous on the survey: 158 said they identified as Métis, 167 as First Nations, and six categorized as “other.”



There was no major difference in the gender association between respondents. Most students identified along male or female lines, as reported by their preferred pronouns. The vast majority were English speakers, with French as the second highest, albeit as a small minority. The average age was 16, and the most students in one grade level were those in Grade 9.

Over 20 percent of those who replied said they had contact with the child welfare system in Manitoba, although there is no specification as to whether that contact was past or present and if it involved them directly or their family. Just over 50 percent said that they did not have contact with Child and Family Services (CFS), and just over 20 percent were not sure. This extremely high number of students who have had contact with CFS is consistent with other data pertaining to the welfare system in Manitoba, and it speaks to the high number of mental health issues noted by students in the survey results.

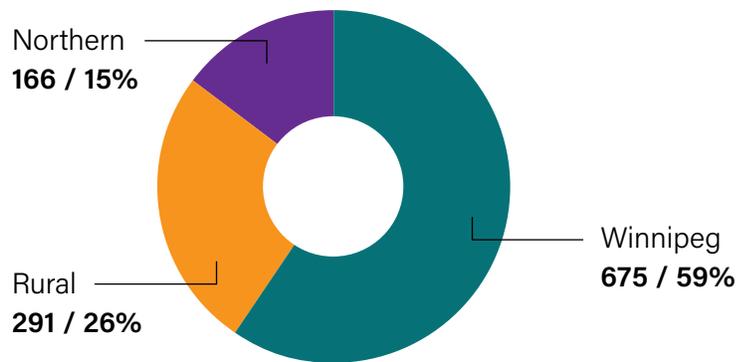


The majority of participants came from the Winnipeg region, with the next highest number coming from rural, followed by northern. Three of the top five school divisions in terms of response rate are located within Winnipeg, while two represent a mix of rural and northern.

► Regional Breakdown

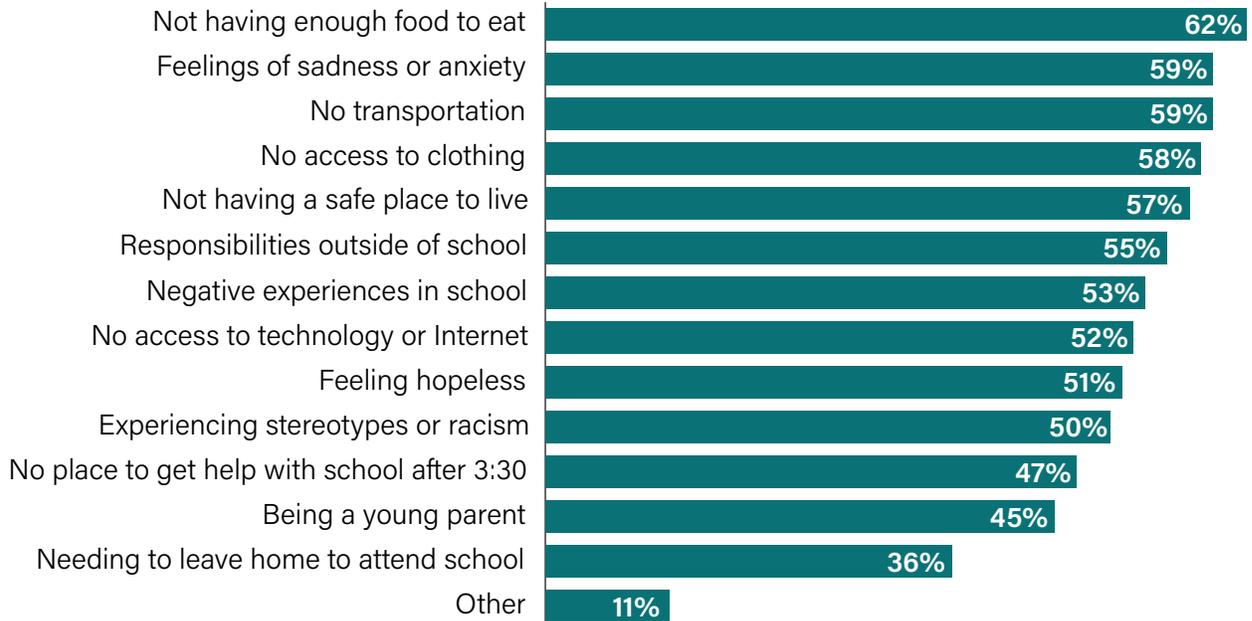
Number of school divisions with at least one reply
22

Student Geographic Location

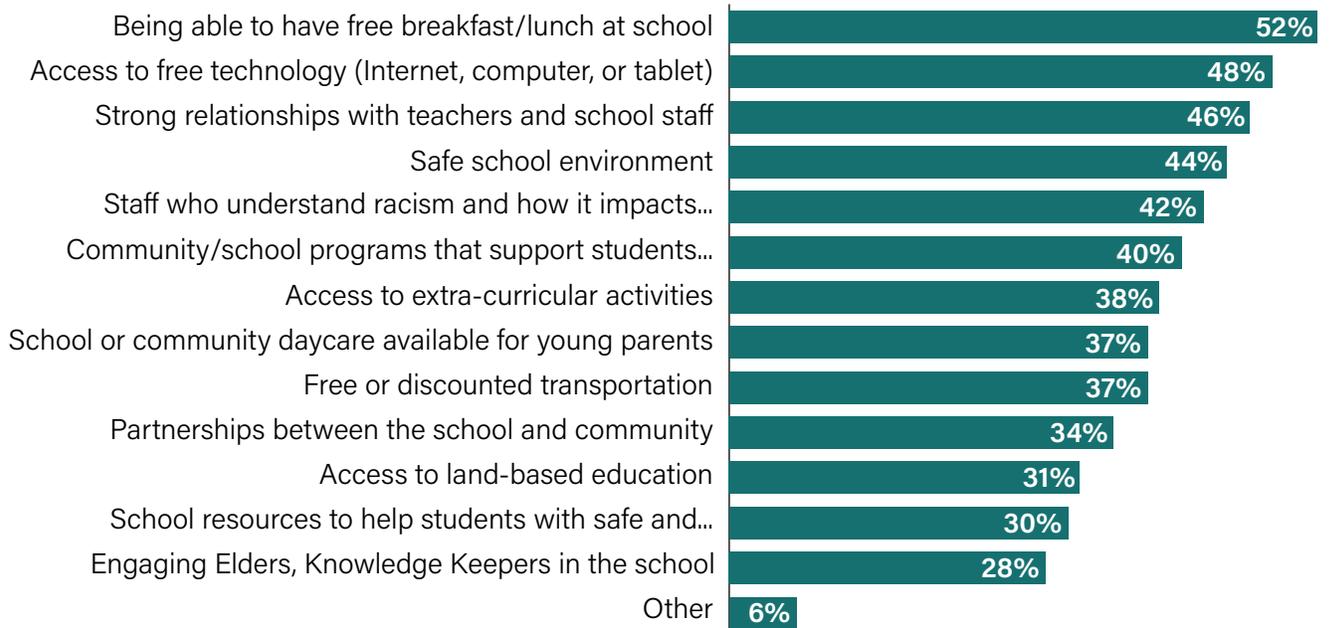


The primary focus of the questionnaire was to ascertain, from the student perspective, what the top barriers are in relation to poverty and school, as well as to identify what is currently working to help mitigate some of those negative impacts.

► Barriers Preventing Students from Attending and Doing Well



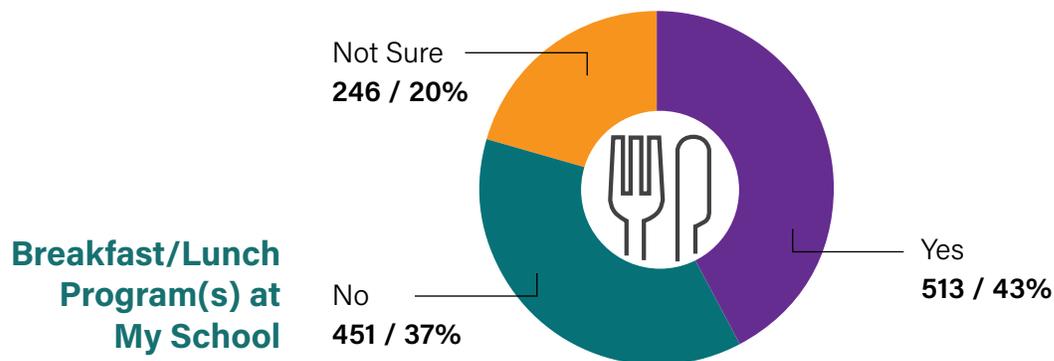
► Already Working for Students Living in Poverty



► Meal Programs

One of the most commonly referenced needs to tackle poverty in schools is the presence of breakfast and lunch programs within the building. The data provides us with an overview of program presence as well as its impacts according to students.

In response to the question, “Does your school have a breakfast or lunch program?”, students replied as follows:



Over one-third of students who responded do not have meal programs in their schools. This suggests there remains a significant need for what was identified as one of the most critical areas around poverty mitigation in education. Furthermore, with 20 percent of students responding “unsure,” it suggests that schools and school divisions have work to do around informing and communicating the availability of meal programs to students and their families.

When asked for the key reason why they may not attend school, 62 percent of students answered “not having enough food to eat.” This was the number one barrier identified by students in the survey. This data reinforces what stakeholders said about the need for meal programs in schools. Further compounding this suggestion, 52 percent of students replied that having meal programs in their school was one of the major things “already working” to combat poverty’s impact on their education.

► Other Resources and Supports

One of the most common concerns identified was a lack of resources such as housing, income assistance, access to technology, and after-school programs. Just over half (58 percent of students) listed not having access to proper clothing, such as winter boots or jackets, as a key reason preventing them from doing well and attending school. In line with this, 59 percent of students listed lack of access to affordable transportation. When it came to technology and school programs, 47 percent said not having a place to get help or support after school was a barrier, and 52 percent said a lack of access to technology, such as a device or the Internet, was a major challenge.

In regard to what's working in these areas, half of the students said access to free technology, 37 percent said access to school or community daycares for young parents, and 37 percent said getting a free or discounted rate for bus fare.

In relation to Indigenous learners specifically, 31 percent said that having land-based learning as part of their schooling was a key reason for their success, while 28 percent said that having access to Elders and Knowledge Keepers was a benefit.

The student survey data is remarkably consistent with what was heard from students during the in-person engagement sessions, the K–12 Commission briefs, stakeholder panels, and other key government data on poverty and education. These survey results help us to understand further what students require to mitigate poverty as it relates to success in school, while also confirming again that we know where the gaps are and how to fill them. The fact that students and adults are speaking the same language around these topics reaffirms the accuracy of our understanding and helps to engage young people as next steps are taken.



Community-Based Student Consultations

There were 12 consultations held with students directly inside of their own communities during the process. Communities were chosen based on socio-economic indicators, including income and graduation rates. The total number of those who engaged in person was 266 (for more details, see [Appendix A](#)).

During these sessions, conversations were facilitated and guided by moderators. The questions asked were the foundation (see [Appendix C](#)). This summary highlights the responses given for each question.

There was tremendous overlap on discussion topics among groups, and the responses listed here reflect the most commonly mentioned. The words and quotations outlined below were selected as the most often repeated and articulated by students. They are the exact words chosen in their responses to the questions posed.

To set the stage for the survey, participants were asked to list the words that most often came to mind when they think about poverty. Here is a list of the most common responses:

- homeless
- money
- food
- disability
- CFS
- dying
- sad
- addictions
- minimal
- hungry
- less opportunity
- mental health
- neglected
- starvation
- less fortunate
- lacking

During the northern sessions, issues of safety, isolation, and lack of mental health and community resources were evident. In one small group, students talked about how some kids run away when they go to the city because they do not want to go back to the remoteness and isolation from urban areas like Winnipeg.

Although there was a substantial degree of consistency in the feedback students provided across regions, there were naturally some differences that were specific to regions.

► In Their Voices: Student Quotes from In-Person Sessions

Children in Care

“
Stop taking children
and start supporting
families.”

“
Keep a child with
the family and in the
community.”

Nutrition

“
Breakfast programs
in schools.”

Indigenous Student Supports

“
We need someone to
meet, greet, and support
and walk beside us when
coming to cities or aging
out of care.”

“
Hire more Indigenous
teachers.”

“
Teach our language.”

“
Mentorship programs,
especially for youth
coming from northern
remote, isolated
communities.”

“
Create an exchange
program to address
segregation issues
and to explore outside
their community
offers or field trips.”

► Northern

Consultation with students in the North included one northern, remote fly-in community that engaged 25 students between Grades 9 and 12. These students were a homogeneous population of youth who had little contact with urban areas like Winnipeg except for medical appointments and, for some, a visit to the Red River Exhibition. When discussing food insecurity, students noted they didn't eat many fruits and vegetables.

Students in the northern region who participated spoke more often about the need for access to affordable food and transportation than the other groups. The word “resources,” referring generally to programs, food, and transportation, was used over 30 times in the northern session alone. They noted that the cost of living in the North is very high, and that the price of everyday items, especially health foods, is often inaccessible. Furthermore, students from this region cited concerns around homelessness, overcrowded housing, and sleeping arrangements in addition to the high cost of Manitoba Hydro rates—an issue not raised prominently by students in other regions. One participant noted that there was a feeling that more programs were available for kids in care living within southern regions than northern ones. The need to relocate from the community and contend with transportation obstacles notably appeared more often in feedback from students in the northern region as well.

► Rural

Like their peers from the northern group, students in the rural sessions also talked about affordability, transportation, and more access to programs in their communities. There was lots of talk about supports to help youth find employment and to assist them with accessing government resources such as photo ID and driver's licences. Like their peers in the other groups, rural students focused on healthy and accessible meal programs at school, mental health supports (especially for anxiety and depression), as well as changes to CFS to include more say for kids in their living arrangements, less apprehension, more sensitivity training for workers, and more consistency with supports.

► Urban

There was significant crossover in the feedback from urban region students compared to that from the other two. Like the others, there were plenty of references made to the need for healthy meal programs, changes to CFS apprehension policies, and access to mental health supports. Bus fares were referenced more than in the other groups; the need for free or heavily subsidized bus passes was mentioned over a dozen times across the different question sets. There was less talk about the concerns around leaving the community than noted in the rural and, especially, the northern groups.

► Similarities

With the exception of the cost of food in remote communities (North), hydro bills (rural and North), and relocation away from home communities (North), all three regions were aligned in noting that the biggest needs centred on mental health supports, increases to income assistance, more support for youth aging out of care, transportation subsidies, and wide-scale changes to CFS (including less apprehension, more sensitivity training, and food programs).

Student Solutions

The feedback generated from the online student survey reinforced many of the key sentiments expressed by students during the in-person sessions across all regions. Out of this feedback emerged several substantial recommendations from students directly, which in their own words expresses the impact that poverty has on their lives and the steps that can be taken to address the associated issues.

► Mental Health

“The kids aren’t just a number, the longer we have to wait the more our mental health deteriorates.”

— student participant from the Winnipeg region

One of the most common recurring themes throughout the consultation, whether from stakeholders or students themselves, was the need for more support around mental health, particularly as it relates to anxiety, depression, and hopelessness and addiction. The word “anxiety” was consistent and prominent throughout all touch points with students during the consultative process. Students expressed the need for support inside of schools as well to help address these problems. As one student said, “We need nurses back in schools, as well as agency liaisons that are active at all times, to prevent, not fix after the fact.” Another summarized their feelings by stating, “We need solutions such as therapy, better housing, and emotional support—someone to meet and greet, support, and walk beside us when we come to the city.”

In the student survey, just under 60 percent of youth stated that feelings of anxiety or sadness kept them away from school. This was second only to a lack of food as the top reason for what prevented them from attending and doing well. In addition, feelings of negativity (generally speaking), along with hopelessness and the impacts of racism, topped the list of other barriers to success and well-being. Many students acknowledged that anxiety has worsened as a result of the pandemic. As one student put it, “We need to socialize our kids. I need to know how to talk.”

► Housing/Homelessness

“We need to provide more affordable housing for teens that are experiencing homelessness.”

— student participant from the northern region

Students talked about living in overcrowded homes, where they face challenges related to sanitation, anxiety, and depression. As a result of too many people living together in low-quality homes, there is often no place to do homework, study, sleep adequately, or have privacy. The realities of their home lives has a direct impact on their academic performance in school and their desire to attend. Many families rely upon students to babysit or perform other responsibilities that take away from their schooling—conditions they said are related to and intensified by low-quality housing. Lack of and poor housing quality also have an impact on sleep, which in turn perpetuates a cycle of apathy, depression, and anxiety. Some students mentioned a lack of clean running water as a barrier at home.

In addition to challenges at home, students talked about the broader need for homeless shelters in the community to help young people who are struggling. The issue of homelessness was often raised in relation to youth living in care. “We also need more transitional housing and life skills for youth that are aging and are at risk of homelessness,” said one student during an in-person session.

► Keeping Families Together

“We need to increase the level of training opportunities for CFS workers around Indigenous ways of knowing and being in culture.”

— student participant from the rural region

“Stop taking us from our families and communities.”

— student participant from the northern region

The impacts of the child welfare system on families, on student well-being (both academically and socially), as well on the broader community were highlighted by youth throughout the in-person sessions and online survey. Most frequently, students made statements like “stop taking kids from their families,” “help the parents,” and “keep children connected to family, community, culture, and identity.” In addition they referenced the need for ensuring safe and loving foster homes with more of a comprehensive understanding of Indigenous cultures, better efforts to keep families together in community, and increasing support for youth on the verge of aging out of care. On that front, many youth expressed a need for more direct guidance: “If you are hitting the age to be out of care, CFS should at least give the person a helping hand to find jobs and manage finances, for example.” Many students suggested that the age at which a student loses support from CFS be raised to 25, and that, along with it, a more significant number of resources are in place to help plan for living arrangements, finances, job security, and mental health supports.

Students acknowledged the stigma associated with being in care and how that can affect them in school. One student remarked, “We need more emotional support. Kids need to learn emotional regulation to keep children in the community at the schools they attend. Don’t take kids out of the classroom to talk about things with CFS workers—it creates a stigma.” Other students stated they feel it is critical for more people to understand the history of residential schools and the impact that removing kids from their homes can have: “Teach the history of residential schools with regard to CFS and its impact on students and children, in order to educate all teachers and all Canadians.”

Many students suggested that those who have had contact with the child welfare system should be given access to mental health support at no cost. "Anyone who came from CFS should have free therapy," said one youth.

“When a child is removed and placed in care, it impacts their schooling and their mental health. They need emotional support. They need wraparound support. Just because they get taken out of their home doesn’t mean the foster home is any better. People just assume it’s the child’s fault or that they are troubled. Listen to the kids and actually hear what the child says.”

— student participant from the northern region

There was a lot of commentary on the need for better foster homes. Several young people talked emotionally about abuse suffered in foster homes and said they resented the fact that some were only “in it for the money.” Another suggested that the agencies “make foster parents jump through the same hoops that parents have to get their kids back, in order to ensure child safety.” One youth with experience in foster care suggested “random drop-ins” and more sophisticated “background checks” were needed to ensure that foster homes were safe for kids. “We need more intervention and prevention programs to help parents get better. Foster homes are not really a safe environment for children,” said another in relation to how they felt the system could be improved.

► Cost of Living/Isolation

“The government could do so much to help remote isolated communities. They could increase salaries, welfare and the minimum wage. They can also provide free hydro and water to create a balance in wealth so that people can strive for food instead of stressing over bills.”

— student participant from the northern region

Students talked about the high cost of living as a major barrier to success in school. The most frequently raised issue associated with costs was related to power. Several students stated that the government should “provide free hydro or a reduced rate, especially for communities impacted by hydro dams or homes that are not built efficiently.” Along with hydro rates, students expressed frustration and concern around the limitations of their access to a wide array of resources due to geographic isolation and the poverty that stems from it. Without access to stable Internet, transportation that allows for more affordable and efficient access to larger communities, and technology at home to support academics, youth are left at a serious disadvantage, along with feelings of worthlessness and sadness.

When asked what could be done to alleviate these pressures, one student stated during an in-person session that we could “increase the social assistance rates to cover everything, including sports, technology such as laptops and tablets, and recreation costs.” Another stated that it would be very helpful to have “some sort of transportation provided for children and families living outside of town so they can stay and attend programs in town after school, like a free community bus shuttle.” Students in rural and northern communities in particular were hyper-aware of the resources they lacked relative to other students in more southern or wealthier parts of the province. Enhancements in these areas, they said, would provide sufficient, much-needed relief.

► Language and Culture

“Have more culture camps available for Indigenous youth to get back to the grassroots and disconnect from the city. I went and it helped my mental health and to learn more things.”

— student participant from the northern region

Indigenous students in particular expressed strong feelings about the need for language preservation and revitalization, along with a deeper understanding of Indigenous cultures within schools and foster homes.

Indigenous youth spoke positively about cultural credit courses where they are able to earn academic credit for learning that takes place outside of the school. This was especially true for students in urban settings. Students stated they feel empowered when exploring their histories and cultures. “(I want to) talk about Indigenous movements like land back, water, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and the TRC. We need to be educated on current Indigenous events as well as our history and culture, including land-based knowledge,” said one youth. Another put it quite simply: “I wish I could get credit for fishing.”

The need for language programs in schools, supported by Elders and other community members, was often cited by students during in-person sessions. “Teach my language and my culture,” stressed a student from a rural region.

Students stated they have a strong desire to learn more about their ancestors and said they feel that language classes are a strong mechanism through which to do so. In addition, those living in foster homes with non-Indigenous families stated they feel it is necessary to help those foster parents better understand how to provide support around their history.

► Racism

When asked what topics were missing from the discussions, the word “racism” came up quite significantly during the in-person sessions, as well as in the responses students provided in their workbooks and in the online survey. Students said they want “more youth sessions where people actually listen(ed).” They “want all Canadians to learn about the true history of Canada and how it has impacted Indigenous peoples.” Many students expressed that they feel judged for being Indigenous or for being a kid in care, which in turn has caused them to feel anxious, excluded, and not wanting to attend school. They indicated they want to see “more Indigenous teachers in schools” and “more Elders to learn from.” Students said they feel very disconnected from their families and communities, and talked about how they toughen up and don’t care after a while, and “this is when you start to fight, drink, or do drugs because you don’t care anymore.” Overall, students indicated they want people to hear them and to care about them, but they don’t feel that their voices matter or that they matter because they are Indigenous.

Key Themes

Throughout each engagement, participants were given the opportunity to make recommendations to the task force. Although there was some diversity in the responses provided, there were a few themes that were overwhelmingly referenced time and again. The list below is not exhaustive; however, it serves to represent those ideas and next steps that were most commonly cited across all touch points during the process, inclusive of feedback from students, stakeholders, and community members.

► Nutrition Programs

There was unanimous agreement that there is an ongoing need for lunch and breakfast programs in schools. The key components of a successful program require that there be no costs attached and that there be equity-based meal programs to ensure food is available to those who need it, culturally relevant foods and lessons related to them, and healthy, nutritious options, alongside learning around sustainability. Students noted that these programs are extremely beneficial in terms of helping them feel safe, stable, cared for, and incentivized to go to school.

► Schools as Community Hubs

The notion of “community” was a common theme raised by participants throughout the process, with several perspectives taken. One is the idea that schools must serve as “hubs” where a variety of services can be accessed by families and students. Schools are generally seen as safe places with familiarity and close proximity, which makes them ideal places to provide support. Examples of the main services that participants stated they would like to see include, but are not limited to, the availability of nurses, addiction workers, tax clinics, after-school programs, cultural events, and summer programs.

In a more philosophical sense, community is required in a holistic sense to ensure that children and their families have all of the support they need to work through the challenges associated with poverty. This means the involvement of several key stakeholders, including schools, school divisions, government departments, Elders, not-for-profits (food, shelter, mental health), health services, restorative justice officials, and mentors.

► Stable and Predictable Long-Term Funding

Funding was mentioned repeatedly for providing helpful programs; however, it is not just the existence of funding itself, but that it be predictable and long-term. A huge amount of time and energy is being spent applying for grants, planning, and trying to adapt to the unknowns year over year. Participants indicated that funding should be monitored, assessed, and advocated for in order to create the stability needed to flourish in the long term.

Providing students with technological devices such as laptops, transportation subsidies, and Internet access are key components of the type of funding that is needed long-term to ensure students have reliable and predictable access to some of the most pressing areas of need to support their learning in school and beyond.

Many of the students, as well as stakeholders from the panels, agreed that funding is also required for key services that prevent students affected by poverty from reaching their potential and, critically, from attending school. Such supports include the need for more affordable transportation (free for kids in care), free access to digital devices for kids in care, increases to the assistance for kids aging out of care, and money to run breakfast and lunch programs. Internet infrastructure investments for northern and rural communities in particular must be a priority.

► Mental Health and Addictions Supports

It should be recognized that mental health challenges and addiction are prominent among all citizens, but generally hit harder for those living in poverty, as they are without the structural supports needed to get help and face greater pressures on already limited resources.

Furthermore, there is a need for more mental health counsellors and addictions specialists to be made available to both families and children in schools. With greater access points in familiar and trusted settings, families will be more included and better able to get the help they need and deserve. This, in turn, will help reduce some of the other associated impacts of poverty.

► Indigenous Learners

Given Manitoba's place as home to Canada's highest Indigenous population (per capita) and the disproportionate degree to which children are taken from their homes, contracting type-2 diabetes, becoming negatively involved with the justice system, and dropping out of school, special attention must be given to children from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities. There should be resources allocated to ensure sustained Elder involvement in all schools in Manitoba, along with more language programs, food programs that are culturally relevant, and ongoing attention paid to curriculum that teaches about Canada's past and present.

► Out of Scope

Throughout the discussions with stakeholders, a number of recommendations were made that fall outside the scope of this report but are seen as consequential and directly related to the impacts of poverty on education and the next steps required to find equitable solutions.

Among the most prominent are recommendations related to an increase in employment assistance and what they called a "liveable wage." It was suggested that increases have been stagnant for many years, and with inflation driving up the cost of living at record highs, students and their families in need of these supports are able to do less and less. As such, increases to the base rates of employment and income assistance are a critical next step for helping to assist students to achieve better results and greater well-being in school. The soaring rate of inflation has disproportionately affected those already experiencing poverty, creating further pressures on overall household finances and putting food needs in conflict with other necessities such as medical costs, transportation, and tuition.

Stakeholders noted that there are a number of shortcomings preventing children in care from accessing necessary supports. A few points that were frequently made related to the need for free bus passes and increases in employment income assistance. It was mentioned that many children simply do not go to school because they can't get there. In addition (and as noted in other panels), employment income assistance rates are too low to support youth aging out of care and have not had substantial increases that reflect inflation and the overall cost of living.

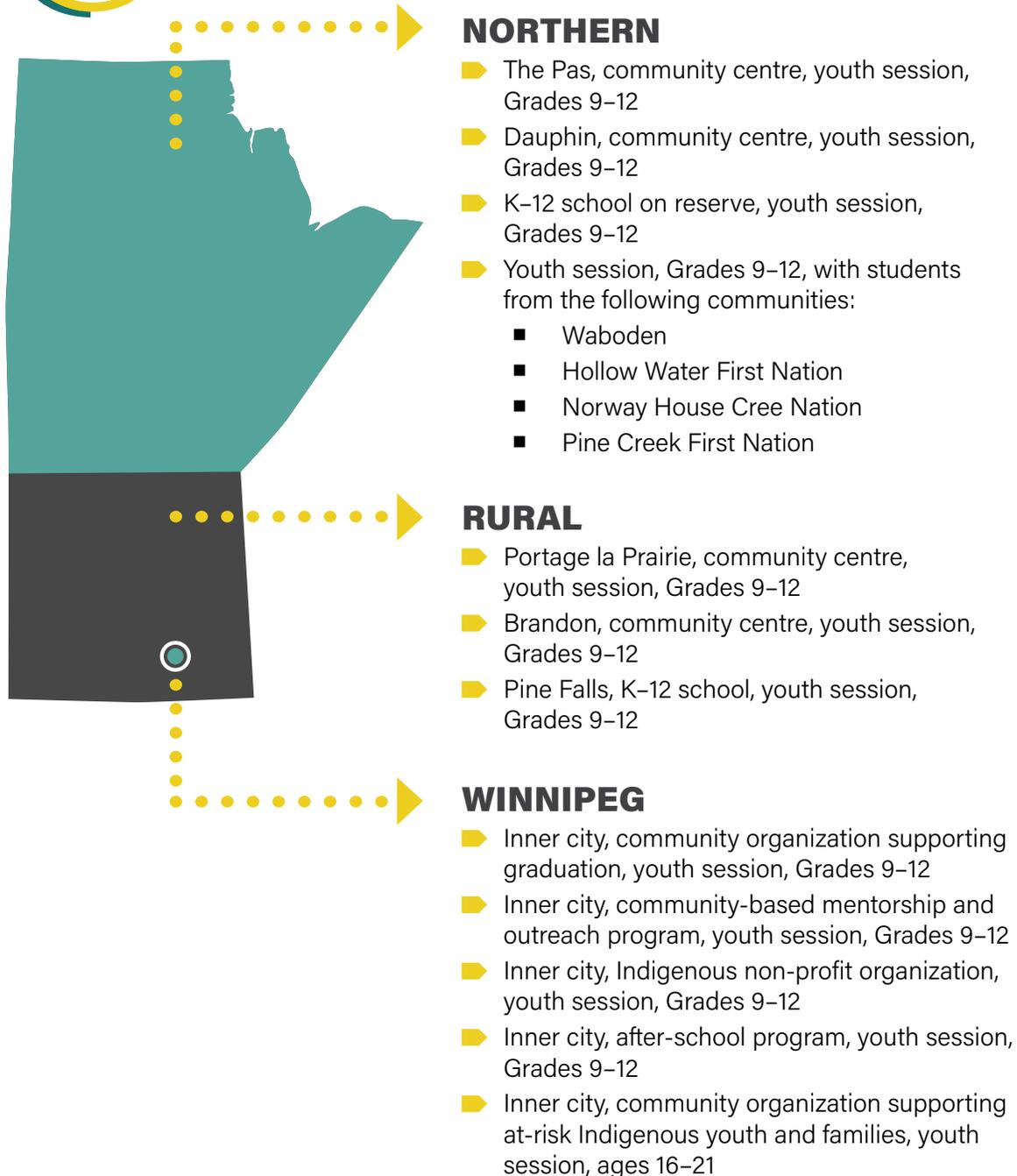
Conclusion

A remarkable pattern emerging from this report is how closely aligned the reflections and recommended approaches for tackling poverty are among an array of those who were consulted. It did not matter whether they are students, Elders, stakeholders, leaders, parents, or educators—all acknowledged there are things that are working and provided details on what they were and why they succeed. They also all identified the key barriers that lead to poverty and perpetuate it, and the adverse impacts these barriers have on student learning in Manitoba. The good news in all of this, they said, is that many of the answers are out there already. We know what is working and what is not. Collectively, we can build the type of education system that our children deserve.

Appendix A: Engagement Sessions



In-Person Community-Based Student Sessions





Online Stakeholder Panel Sessions

- ▶ Aboriginal Centre of Winnipeg
- ▶ BUILD Winnipeg
- ▶ Canadian Mental Health Authority
- ▶ Career Trek
- ▶ CEDA Pathways
- ▶ Children of the Earth High School
- ▶ City of Winnipeg—Community Development Division
- ▶ City of Winnipeg—Poverty Reduction Strategy, Indigenous Helpers Society
- ▶ Community Education Development Association
- ▶ Fearless R2W
- ▶ First Nations Child and Family Advocate
- ▶ Food Matters
- ▶ Manitoba Advocate for Children and Youth
- ▶ Manitoba Centre for Health Policy
- ▶ Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre
- ▶ The Manitoba Teachers' Society
- ▶ Mount Carmel Clinic
- ▶ Ndinawe
- ▶ Ojijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin
- ▶ Social Planning Council
- ▶ The Pas Friendship Centre (Food Bank Program)
- ▶ Harvest Manitoba



Appendix B: Stakeholder Panel Questions

The following questions were used to guide the conversation during these panel discussions:

1. As you consider the impacts of poverty on learning, what are some programs/initiatives that are working well to support youth (school, division, community, government)?
2. What recommendations might you have for leaders at the school, school division, community, and government levels to reduce barriers for youth who live in poverty?
3. What supports or resources are needed to support children in care, or those aging out of care, to be well and do well in school?
4. What ideas do you have to improve community access to healthy food for youth living in poverty (urban, rural, and northern)?
5. Acknowledging the disproportionately high rates of poverty in Manitoba for Indigenous people and the impact of poverty on learning, what can be done to improve learning outcomes for Indigenous youth?
6. What topics are missing from this discussion?



Appendix C: Community-Based Student Session Questions

The following questions were used to guide the conversation during the community-based discussions:

1. What are some of the things that may prevent students who live in poverty from attending or doing well in school?
2. What is already working in Manitoba to help students living in poverty?
3. What can school communities and governments do to support Indigenous youth who live in poverty?
4. What supports and resources are needed to help children in care to do well and be well in school? Is there anything else you would recommend to support youth aging out of care?
5. What ideas do you have to improve community access to healthy food for youth living in poverty?
6. As a leader in our province, what is the one thing you would do to reduce poverty for students living in Manitoba schools?
7. What topics are missing from this discussion?