

POVERTY and **EDUCATION** TASK FORCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

February 2023

Executive Summary

The creation of the provincial Task Force on Poverty and Education was one of the recommendations in the final report of the Commission on Kindergarten to Grade 12 Education, and it was a commitment made in Manitoba's K to 12 Action Plan.

Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning launched the task force in the fall of 2021. The key responsibilities were to examine the impact of poverty on education and to put forth recommendations and actionable strategies with an initial focus on

- food access and security
- access to technology, transportation, and other socio-economic barriers to participation
- outcomes and continuity of education for children in care

The task force was made up of diverse members representing students, parents, teachers, school leaders, stakeholder organizations, community groups, the City of Winnipeg, and the Manitoba government.

This final report builds upon a series of engagements undertaken across Manitoba by Boivin Communication Group Inc. and the project team between March and November 2022. This included secondary research, a provincial high school survey, as well as targeted in-person, community-based sessions with youth and virtual stakeholder sessions.

The recommendations of the report are organized by the following themes:

- 1. Food Security and Nutrition:** Enhance food security and increase access to nutritious food for students living in poverty.
- 2. Mental Health:** Support the mental health and well-being of students living in poverty.
- 3. Racism and Discrimination:** Ensure a culturally safe, anti-racist, and inclusive learning environment for students living in poverty.
- 4. Transportation:** Enhance transportation accessibility for students living in poverty.
- 5. Technology:** Support digital equity through accessibility for students living in poverty.
- 6. Supports for Indigenous Students:** Ensure an Indigenous-inclusive education system that is reflected across the curriculum, programming, policy, and education workforce.
- 7. Supports for Children in Care:** Enhance the well-being of children in care who live in poverty, including a focus on ensuring service coordination and cultural supports.
- 8. Intersectoral/Holistic Approach:** Provide holistic services and supports for students living in poverty.
- 9. Equity in Education:** Apply an equity lens to planning at the school, division, and provincial levels.

All education partners and stakeholders are asked to review this report and examine opportunities to implement strategies at the classroom, school, organizational, and community levels to reduce the impacts of poverty on education. This report will be shared and acted upon by all stakeholders, education partners, relevant government bodies, as well as the Poverty Reduction Committee of Cabinet, as specified in the Terms of Reference.

Summary of Recommendations

1. **Recommendation:** Enhance food security and increase access to nutritious food for students living in poverty.

- Review in-school meal programs and partnerships to improve access and ensure equitable distribution of funding and resources.
 - Prioritize students living in poverty and schools/communities experiencing high poverty.
 - Prioritize student voices in food security solutions (e.g., include student voices as part of divisional/school programming and decision making around nutrition).
- Provide students and families with access to community gardens and kitchen-related spaces in schools for meal planning and preparation, especially in communities experiencing high poverty.
- Pursue public and private partnerships to support and enhance school and community-based nutrition programming, including access to nutrition outside of school hours.
- Review and revise the *Healthy Food in Schools* website, existing guidelines, and policy documents to ensure Indigenous values on food, diet, and health are reflected.
- Revise existing Manitoba K to 12 curriculum (i.e., physical education, health, human ecology, and vocational education) to include learnings about Indigenous teachings and worldviews, food sovereignty, meal planning, and long-term food security. This process should include working together with diverse partners and stakeholders.
- Expand horticulture programming across Manitoba schools by ensuring flexibility within course offerings. This should provide more flexibility in curriculum for credit attainment in areas such as gardening, aquaponics, and food sovereignty.

2. **Recommendation:** Support the mental health and well-being of students living in poverty.

- Provide improved access to culturally safe mental health supports and trauma-informed practices. This includes the redistribution of existing funding and staffing to provide easily accessible, barrier-free access to students living in poverty in school.
 - Consider various methods for students to access culturally safe mental health services (e.g., in person, online, telephone) to ensure accessibility across Winnipeg and rural and northern communities.
 - Pursue targeted programs, such as the Indigenous wellness program [Kids Help Phone: Brighter Days](#) (online module-based training for Indigenous youth).

- Ensure equity in decision making in the allocation and distribution of clinical support services, with increased supports given to schools with low socio-economic indicators.
- Prioritize clinical services in the Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning workforce planning strategy.
- Continue funding mental health projects in schools through Manitoba's Teachers' Idea Fund, prioritizing equity-based initiatives.
- Build mental health and wellness into the provincial curriculum and professional development for all education staff and school leaders, especially in communities with high poverty.
- Continue to authentically involve Elders and Knowledge Keepers in schools to provide students with culturally appropriate and safe supports.

3. Recommendation: Ensure a culturally safe, anti-racist, and inclusive learning environment for students living in poverty.

- Ensure supports and services are provided in a way that protects the dignity of students living in poverty (e.g., distribution practices that are needs-based, accessible, barrier-free, inclusive, safe, and non-stigmatizing).
- Create hiring and retention practices and policies to increase and ensure school staff are inclusive of equity-deserving groups. Teachers of Indigenous languages, formally credentialed or not, should be considered. Recommendations made in the *State of Equity in Education Report* by the Winnipeg Indigenous Executive Circle should support decision making.
- Develop and provide mandatory professional learning for all staff on communication, cultural safety, anti-racism, and inclusive educational practices. Consider partnerships among government, school divisions, the Manitoba Teachers' Society, and community organizations.
- Review existing curriculum for opportunities to include instruction on the topic of poverty, its consequences, and its root causes in order to create an empathic environment, expand awareness, and reduce stigmatization.
- Develop and implement a provincial anti-racism policy for all school divisions as a means of providing additional pathways to students living in poverty to report and reduce incidents of racism and discrimination. This includes strengthening anti-racism content in curriculum for all grades.
- Continue to implement *Mamàhtawisiwin: The Wonder We Are Born With—Manitoba's Indigenous Education Policy Framework* province-wide.
- Continue to collect information about the school experiences of students living in poverty to better understand and address concerns related to racism and discrimination. This could be collected through an annual K to 12 provincial census (e.g., Ontario, Alberta).

4. Recommendation: Enhance transportation accessibility for students living in poverty.

- Review and modify *The Public Schools Act* (PSA) to ensure policies offer barrier-free transportation services to all students living in poverty. This includes revisiting transportation distance requirements (1.6 km) to allow for increased flexibility for students living in poverty. (Currently, the transportation section of *The Public Schools Act* mentions other sub-groups, such as youth with additional needs, but does not include students living in poverty.)
- Consider alternative modes of transportation in rural and northern communities due to a lack of public transportation options and extreme weather conditions.
- Pursue public and private partnerships to offer free bus passes to all students living in poverty in communities where public transit is available. This includes partnerships with all levels of government (e.g., Department of Families [Employment and Income Assistance] and the City of Winnipeg and Brandon).

5. Recommendation: Support digital equity through accessibility for students living in poverty.

- Allocate equitable funding for devices for students living in poverty. This may include increasing the capacity of computer loan programs and providing students living in poverty with after-school technology user support, including troubleshooting and repairs.
- Reduce risks associated with expanded access to devices, including exploitation and abuse, by
 - involving students and educating them about the risks
 - notifying caregivers
 - updating privacy and safety settings
 - reviewing content
 - recognizing signs of abuse

Consideration should be given to partnerships with community organizations and the role they play in ensuring the safe use of technology for students outside of school hours.

- Partner with service providers to expand affordable Internet access in rural and northern Manitoba. A focus should be placed on partnering with service providers to provide free/low-cost Internet access in schools experiencing greater poverty.
- Promote existing programs to expand access to Internet connections, including the following:
 - Government of Canada *Connecting Families* program, which is designed to reduce fees for Internet connection to families with low-incomes
 - Universal Broadband Fund, which was developed as part of the federal *High Speed Access for All: Canada's Connectivity Strategy*

6. Recommendation: Ensure an Indigenous-inclusive education system that is reflected across the curriculum, programming, policy, and education workforce.

- Prioritize recruitment and retention efforts to increase the number of Indigenous teachers and teachers of Indigenous languages. This should include partnerships and planning with post-secondary institutions.
- Expand initiatives that support traditional Indigenous knowledge systems for Indigenous youth, such as
 - Indigenous Graduation Coach programs
 - cultural advisors
 - Indigenous language immersion programs (K to 12)
- Develop additional curriculum and credit options (K–12) prioritizing Indigenous ways of knowing, being, doing, and learning, including ceremony. This includes treaty education and land-based education, as reflected in the *Indigenous Education Policy Framework*. At the high school level, these courses should be implemented for credit.
- Establish mobility agreements and partner with First Nations communities to develop a single provincial student information system to support Indigenous students in receiving a high-quality education wherever they attend school.
- Continue to support and fund the Elders and Knowledge Keepers in Schools Initiative to ensure adequate funding and longevity of the initiative.
- Develop an approach to implement Indigenous languages courses (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) for high school credit in collaboration with the Manitoba Aboriginal Languages Strategy (MALS) group.
- Continue to report on four- and six-year graduation rates for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in the annual report, as this reinforces multiple pathways for success. Data should be used to inform school-level planning and equitable resource allocation.

7. Recommendation: Enhance the well-being of children in care who live in poverty, including a focus on ensuring service coordination and cultural supports.

- Ensure children in care have barrier-free access to the resources they need to attend and be successful in school, using the child-first approach reflected in Jordan’s Principle.
- Improve information sharing and communication among Child and Family Services (CFS), agencies, social workers, Indigenous governing bodies, and school divisions. The development of a provincial student information system will support this (currently underway).
- Provide access to school community and family rooms for family visits to support the reunification of children in care.

- Revise policy to support children in care through the “one school, one year” model, regardless of what supports are being received (including transportation).
- Implement children-in-care liaisons or outreach workers to bridge a gap between home and school.
- Increase awareness of the tuition waiver program in Manitoba through the creation of a centralized website for resources available to students in care (using <https://agedout.com> as a notable example).
- Explore further development of cultural supports and opportunities specific to Indigenous children in care in connection with the Elders and Knowledge Keepers in Schools Initiative.

8. Recommendation: Provide holistic services and supports for students living in poverty.

- Explore partnerships among government, school divisions, and community organizations to ensure the accessibility of services for students living in poverty.
 - One model for exploration could be schools as community hubs. This would require a conceptual framework, policies, and guidelines.
 - Increase health services and resources for students living in poverty through collaboration among government, school divisions, and community organizations (e.g., WRHA, NRHA, Addictions Foundation of Manitoba, Manitoba Housing, and more).
- Provide high-quality education through interdepartmental collaboration for youth who are incarcerated.
- Continue to develop and implement the provincial attendance strategy and policy framework.
 - Consider parent-student outreach coordinators/liaisons for students who attend schools and live in communities experiencing high poverty.
 - Cease the use of withdrawal as a response to poor attendance.
 - Ensure ongoing school programming for students who are experiencing barriers to attendance.
- Expand the Community Schools Program to include additional schools within high-poverty communities.

9. Recommendation: Apply an equity lens to planning at the school, division, and provincial levels.

- Government and school divisions support a shared understanding of equity, as developed by stakeholders and the community. This shared definition should affect decision making at all levels (e.g., funding, policy, priorities).
- Explore an Education Equity Impact Assessment for use in Manitoba, such as the Ontario Ministry of Health's Health Equity Impact Assessment model (2022).
- Develop or amend school division policy to prioritize equitable decision making for all resources (e.g., staffing, programming, resources, and budget).
- Identify the schools and communities with the highest needs based on socio-economic indicators (at the school division level) to prioritize actions for implementation (e.g., decision making, strategic planning, funding). Additional indicators should be considered (e.g., children in care).
- When allocating funding to school divisions across Manitoba, implement an equitable funding model that considers factors such as communities with high poverty, students who are in care, and students with different needs.