MODEL SCHOOLS LITERACY PROJECT:
INVESTING IN CHILDREN

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Martin Family Initiative
Initiative de la Famille Martin

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Institute of Health Policy, Management and Evaluation
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Martin Family Initiative
Initiative de la Famille Martin

WE ARE PLEASED TO SHARE OUR EXPERIENCES AS PARTNERS IN THE MODEL SCHOOLS LITERACY PROJECT

Bernard Constant Community School

Migizi Wazisin Elementary School

Keethanow Elementary School

Chiila Elementary School

Napi's Playground Elementary School

Mah-Sos School

Ermineskin Kindergarten School

Sheshatshiu Innu School

Maupeltuewey Kina'matno'kuom

Keeseekoowenin School

Ermineskin Elementary School

Moosomin First Nation School

L'nu Sipuk Kina'muokuom

Kateri Tsi Ionterihwaienhstahkhwa

Seabird Island Community School

Mamawmatawa Holistic Education Centre

Chief Beardy Memorial Elementary School

Waywayseecappo Community School

For the children

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The Model Schools Literacy Project would not be possible without the commitment and support of the First Nations partners involved, the schools and communities, and the children, families and caregivers. To the principals, teachers and educational assistants who embraced this opportunity to benefit the children, the MFI team is privileged to work and learn alongside you. Thank you for teaching us so much.

OVERVIEW

That literacy is central to human development is affirmed in the educational targets included in the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations: reduced poverty, better health, higher income, economic growth and the exercise of other fundamental rights.[I] But the window of opportunity for literacy is narrow, closing for most by the age of 9 or 10. Early literacy, specifically reading and writing proficiency, is essential for academic progress beyond Grade 3 – for understanding instruction in all the disciplines taught in school, for high school graduation and for inheriting the health, social, cultural and economic benefits literacy offers to individuals and nations. Time is short and the stakes are high.

First Nations want their children to know their own language and culture, be proud of their identity and have the literacy skills necessary to pursue unlimited options and opportunities for their lifetime. For over 10 years, First Nations schools have partnered with the Martin Family Initiative (MFI) to improve early literacy for their children. This report captures what we are learning together in the Model Schools Literacy Project (MSLP, or project), both since its expansion in 2016 and continuing throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings are relevant to all those working to ensure First Nations children inherit their right to read, a critical tool to fully understand, question and influence the world around them.[II]

> ***"The Model Schools Literacy Project and their collaborative approach provides educators with specific expertise that will ensure all students are proficient readers and ready for success in any career path they choose."***
>
> ***Director of Education, First Nations Community***

What is the Model Schools Literacy Project?

The Model Schools Literacy Project is a partnership between First Nations schools and communities across Canada and the Martin Family Initiative. It focuses on improving early literacy achievement within the broader context of school improvement. The goal is for 80% of children to read and write well enough at the end of Grade 3 to support continued school success.

> ***"In our school and within our education policy, we believe strongly in placing our Cree language and cultural teachings at the forefront of our lessons and teachings. Literacy is an integral factor in increasing student achievement in all areas of traditional learning. We believe that one of the ways to instill the culture and the retention of the teachings and practices is through storytelling, reading and writing."***
>
> ***Principal, First Nations School***

English is the language of instruction in the schools, and the MSLP is an English-language literacy project. In each school, the community's Indigenous language and culture are taught. The project values both languages in the school equally: it recognizes that acquisition of one language strengthens acquisition of other languages, and that multiple cognitive, social and cultural benefits accrue to children with proficiency in their own Indigenous language and English. To strengthen that interdependence, classroom teachers in the MSLP are encouraged and supported to incorporate language, history and culture into children's reading and writing activities.

Children share hand drums they created with the community in a drum ceremony.

The MFI team also supports round tables for language and culture teachers – at their request – to come together, share practices and support each other across First Nations.

> ***"One indicator of success is having a strong sense of identity of being Blackfoot and by keeping close to our hearts, minds and spirit is, Our Siksikaitsitapi (Blackfoot ways of knowing), Niipoohsin (Our Blackfoot Language) and Piikaniisiin (Our Piikani way of Life)."***
>
> ***Principal, First Nations School***

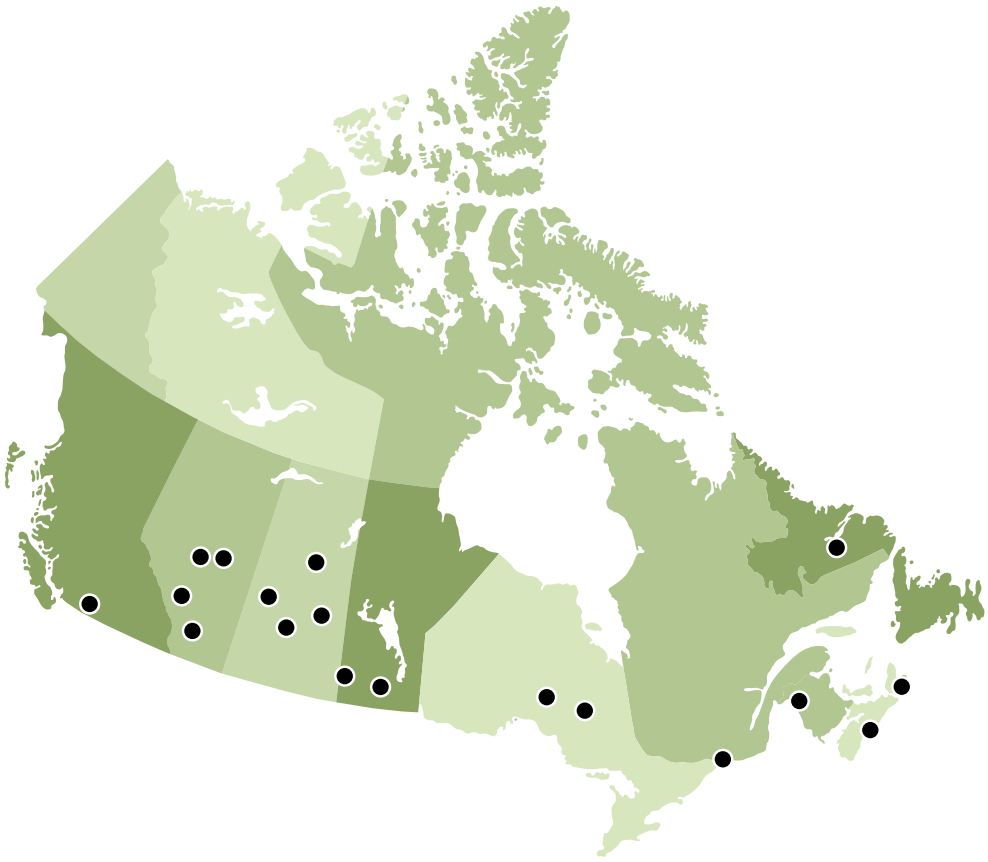
It is essential for First Nations schools to lead and take control of the discussions on the education of their children. To this end, the partner schools have formed a network: a forum where schools come together to learn and share across time, distance and First Nation. Supported by innovative use of technology, the network is unique – a first-of-its-kind forum assembled to improve early literacy and promote school success for First Nations children. This is just one example of how the MSLP maintains a singular focus on improved reading and writing achievement.

Who are the partner schools?

The MSLP is a pan-Canadian expansion of a successful pilot program that ran from 2010 to 2014. The pilot was a partnership between two First Nations schools, operated by Walpole Island First Nation and Kettle and Stony Point First Nation, and MFI.[III]

Current participants include 18 First Nations schools comprising three school cohorts (six entered in 2016, six in 2018 and six in 2020). Some quick facts about the project:

- Schools are located across five time zones, from Labrador to British Columbia.
- The children are taught their culture and language: nine Indigenous languages, three dialects of Cree.
- Schools cover different grade levels: all schools cover Kindergarten to Grade 3; some continue to Grades 8 or 12.
- Average class size (Kindergarten to Grade 3) across Cohort 1 and 2 schools in 2018–19 was 18, ranging from 9 to 31 children.
- Over 100 classroom teachers participate each year.
- Teaching assistants, resource teachers and teacher librarians participate.
- There were 1,288 children (630 girls, 658 boys) enrolled in the project in 2018–19.
- Over 3,300 children have enrolled in the project since 2016.



Since the project's inception, partnerships with non-Indigenous organizations have expanded and include governments (Government of Canada, Government of Manitoba), the private sector (e.g., Google, TELUS), charitable foundations (Fu Hui Education Foundation, Ignite the Spirit of Education Foundation), provincial school boards (Near North District School Board, Park West School Division, Peel District School Board, Renfrew County District School Board) and universities (University of Toronto, University of British Columbia).

What is involved for partner schools?

School partners come together for a common purpose: to develop and sustain capacity in early literacy education. The project provides an educational forum where problems of practice are identified, solutions shared and innovations in teaching developed. This dynamic forum stimulates change and progress for the schools involved, and lessons learned that can be shared with other First Nations schools.

> ***"Sharing circles allow access not just to mentors, but to other grade-level teachers. This is invaluable in schools with only one of each grade."***
>
> ***Classroom Teacher, First Nations School***

Literacy improvement was a priority in the schools prior to their joining the partnership, and together we build on the professional learning already in place. The project focuses on professional learning for teachers and school leaders because, as research clearly shows, teaching is the most influential school-based factor in children's reading achievement.[IV]

Teachers in the partner schools are fully qualified. However, while teacher education programs in Canada and other developed countries prepare teachers with general pedagogical skills, they do not cover the specific skills needed to teach reading and writing to young children. In a recent international survey, up to 65% of teachers (including from Canada) reported they were not adequately prepared to teach early literacy effectively, especially to children who struggle.[V]

> ***"We were struggling to find the best way to help our students grow. We tried program after program, but never really seeing the deep reaching impacts that were advertised. The Model Schools Literacy Project was never about a program with advertised results, but rather a plan to build better educators."***
>
> ***Literacy Lead, First Nations School***

The MFI team works with school staff to implement an evidence-based literacy improvement plan for Kindergarten to Grade 3 classrooms.[IV] Resources to support implementation (e.g., assessment materials, books for classrooms, video conferencing units, interactive white boards) are provided based on the needs in individual schools. Intensive support is in place for four years, followed by two years of sustainability involvement (a gradual withdrawal of support).

The literacy improvement plan is built on:

- Organization of time, space and resources
- Formative assessment to guide literacy instruction
- Teaching, including direct instruction in all core reading and writing skills
- Contexts for learning (e.g., parental involvement, community engagement)

Under this plan, a 100-minute literacy block is timetabled first thing each morning, and classrooms are organized and resourced to support literacy teaching and learning.

> ***"The resources provided by MFI were a great help in providing quality education to my Junior Kindergarten class."***
>
> ***Classroom Teacher, First Nations School***

The plan's effectiveness was demonstrated in the earlier pilot program (2010–2014). Before the pilot began, 13% of Grade 3 children were reading at grade level on the Ontario provincial assessment; when it ended, 81% reached or exceeded that level, and the percentage of children identified for speech and language support decreased from 45% to 19%.[VI]

A subsequent social impact analysis indicated that, if implemented in all First Nations schools, the project would return over $7 for every dollar invested with fiscal benefits to governments of about $310 million over the lifetime of children participating in every cohort (i.e., the group of all children that started school for the first time in the same year).[1] That amounts to $43,448 per child, and over 20 cohorts of children, these cost savings add up to about $4.9 billion.[VII]

How is the project delivered?

A blended approach of onsite and online is key to professional learning in the project. Through video conferences, school staff collaborates in professional learning with the MFI team and in sharing circles with colleagues at other partner schools (grouped by grade and time zone). Teachers at each grade level have their own Google Classroom where they post their innovations and suggestions to MSLP colleagues across Canada.

Children enjoy sharing their culture projects with visiting Elders

1 This rate of return considers only a subset of potential measures for cost savings, due to data limitations, and it completely ignores the broader social benefits from increased literacy as well as the private benefits accruing to the students themselves and their families. If those were included (assuming data were available), the rate of return would be much higher.

MSLP principals form a professional sharing circle that meets formally in person twice each year and virtually each month to work together on common problems of practice. The MFI team provides ongoing support and mentoring for individual school principals. Principals interact among themselves on an ongoing basis and they also have their own Google Classroom.

> ***"The Model Schools Literacy Project has helped me become a much better leader. Instruction has improved in every area, not just literacy. We are a much stronger school."***
>
> ***Principal, First Nations School***

One of many distinguishing characteristics of the project is that it offers the first opportunity for most school staff to be involved in a professional learning network with colleagues in First Nations schools outside of their region.

The MFI team also:

- Establishes clear accountability mechanisms and measures to track progress and ensure success (e.g., attendance, reading achievement)
- Works with the school leadership and community representatives to engage the community to support and sustain the project

> ***"As an Education Assistant, I was familiar with small groups and pulling students for extra help. MFI not only created more confident and knowledgeable support staff, but they really made us see what a vital role we play in literacy."***
>
> ***Educational Assistant, First Nations School***

How is progress monitored and evaluated?

A comprehensive evaluation of the project has been designed to monitor implementation and determine effectiveness. It is conducted in accordance with the First Nations principles of ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP) developed by the First Nations Information Governance Centre.[VIII] All data and information collected belong to the First Nation schools and communities involved.

Consistent with OCAP principles, capacity building around data is a critical component of the project. Teachers have increased their understanding of informal assessments and use them to group children and target specific areas for instruction. Resource teachers have been trained to administer and interpret standardized tests used in the evaluation. Principals and school staff regularly review their data with support from the MFI team.

> ***"I have personally experienced a paradigm shift in the way I view and teach literacy. We have been able to collaborate to deliver meaningful, culturally relevant literacy instruction to our awasak."***
>
> ***Classroom Teacher, First Nations School***

The evaluation is unique. It is the only longitudinal evaluation of an early literacy program, involving over 3,000 young children in 18 First Nations schools across Canada. It is a gift from these First Nations schools to educators everywhere because it is allowing us to answer questions relevant to other First Nations schools and to schools around the world working to improve early literacy.

The evaluation continues as schools enter the sustainability phase of the project. Ongoing monitoring to track progress and identify barriers and potential solutions is critical for sustainability in the short and longer term. Lessons learned (e.g., findings from surveys of teachers involved) help identify any needed modifications to the project and provide evidence-based guidelines for other schools working to sustain progress on early literacy.

What have we learned so far?

Evaluations of educational programs typically ask the question, Is the program effective? But no educational intervention is equally effective in all schools and for all children. Instead, the questions should be, How effective is the project, for whom and under what conditions? Answering these questions will inform the critical components for improving early literacy achievement.

Measuring effectiveness.

The goal in the project is to have 80% of children at the end of Grade 3 reading well enough to support continued school success. In this context, that means reading at or above the minimal standard on the reading subtest of the Canadian Achievement Test (4th ed.)[IX] – or CAT4 – which is a standardized norm-referenced test administered to children in the project (Kindergarten to Grade 3) in the spring every year.

We are examining the impact of several factors on the children's CAT4 outcomes. These include length of time the project has been in place, consistency of teaching, class size and children's attendance. As well, we are identifying those children for whom the project is differentially effective (e.g., which girls and boys, children who start Kindergarten with well-established preschool literacy skills?).

Impact of the pandemic

The project had been in place for three years before the pandemic interrupted data collection.[2] Because of school closures during the pandemic, we were unable to administer the CAT4 in 2020 to measure children's reading progress. Consequently, the following data on project effectiveness describe what we had learned prior to the closures.

How effective is the project?

Unless otherwise specified, all figures include data for Kindergarten through Grade 3 children attending Cohort 1 schools during 2018–19. Cohort 1 includes six First Nations partner schools, with 754 children enrolled in the project (2018–19) and 1,842 children since the project began. Average class size (2018–19) across 42 classrooms was 18 children, ranging from a low of 12 to a high of 26. For comparison purposes, we use as a benchmark the reading achievement of children in the pilot project (2010–2014) after it had been in place for three years.

Overall, we found that the longer intensive support is in place in the school, the more effective the project proves to be. We followed the children who were in Grade 1 in 2017 through to Grade 3 in 2019. The percentage of children meeting or exceeding the minimal standard on CAT4 more than doubled as they progressed through the three grades.

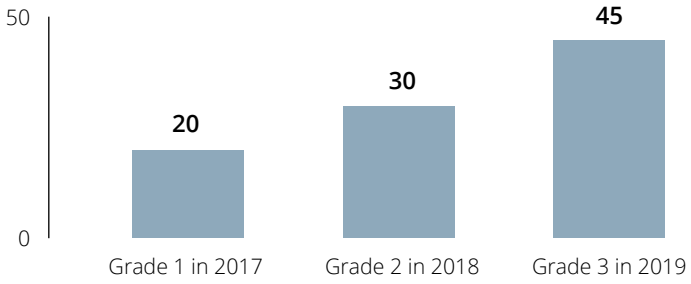


Figure 1. Percentage of children followed from Grade 1 to Grade 3 meeting or exceeding the standard on CAT4

Note: Children with individual education plans in 2018–19 were excluded.

2 Schools were selected in June 2016, but intensive, professional learning was not fully established until fall 2017 after the IT infrastructure and other resources to support the project were in place. To ensure the schools had four years of intensive support, an additional year was added for Cohort 1.

This outcome is equivalent to the outcome at the end of the third year in the pilot project (2013), when 47% of the children met or exceeded the standard on the Ontario provincial reading assessment.[3] Had we been able to administer the CAT4 in 2020, and based on the formative reading assessment data collected and outcomes after four years in the pilot, we would expect that approximately 67% of the children would have met or exceeded the standard.

After three years, more children at each grade in the project are among the top 20% of readers across Canada.

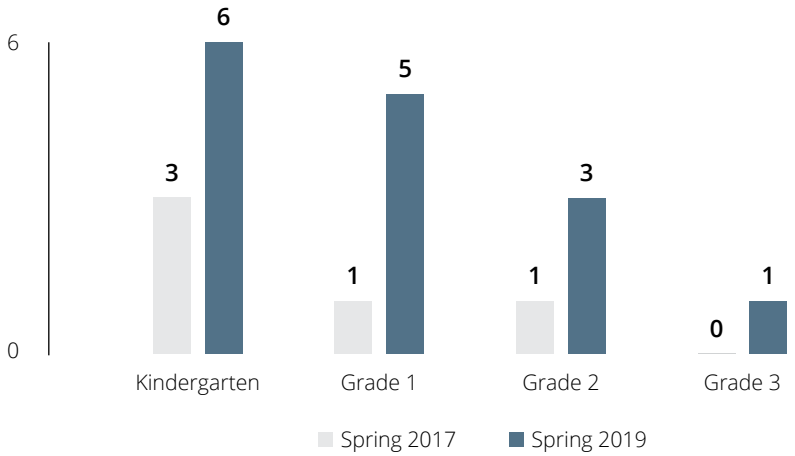


Figure 2. Percentage of children in the MSLP among the top 20% of readers their age in Canada 2017 vs 2019 by grade

After three years, the distribution of children's reading scores on the CAT4 has changed. Fewer children are scoring at the very lowest level, more are achieving higher scores and, overall, there is movement forward on the curve. This change in the distribution from 2016 to 2019 is similar at each grade level.

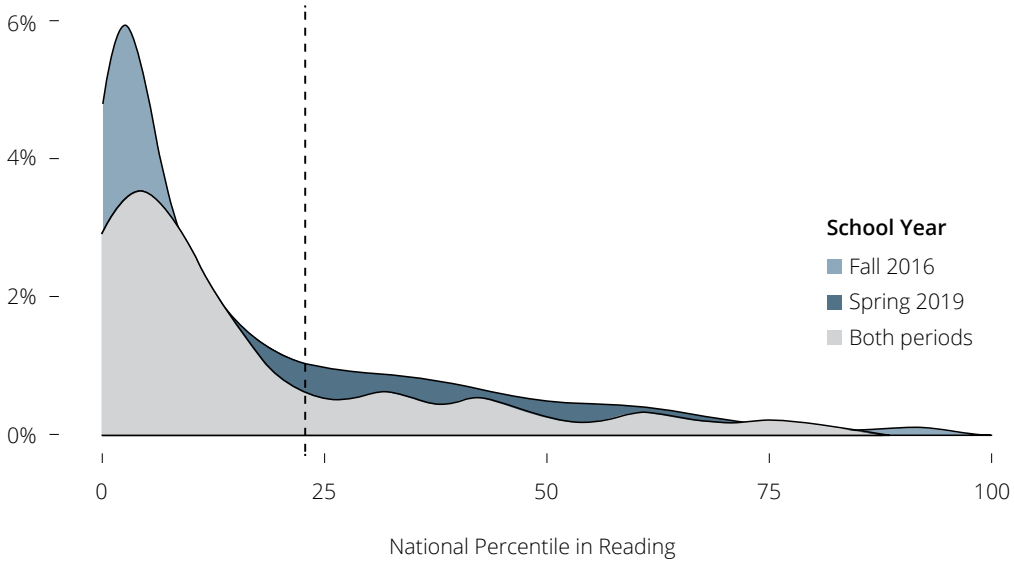


Figure 3. Distribution of CAT4 percentile ranks for Grade 3 children, fall 2016 and spring 2019

Note: Dotted line indicates the minimum expected standard in percentile ranks on the CAT4

3 Outcomes after two years in the current project and two years in the pilot project are equivalent at 31% and 34% respectively.

As Cohort 1 schools move to sustainability (gradual withdrawal of MFI support), the evaluation will identify factors influencing outcomes over time, allowing for modifications of the project where indicated.

What conditions influence the effectiveness of the project?

Consistent teaching time

Teachers in the project have intensive professional learning support for four years. Because effective teaching differs across grade levels, professional learning is specifically designed for each of Kindergarten and Grades 1, 2 and 3. Findings are clear that the more often the literacy block is taught by an MFI-trained teacher, rather than a substitute, the higher the children's reading achievement.

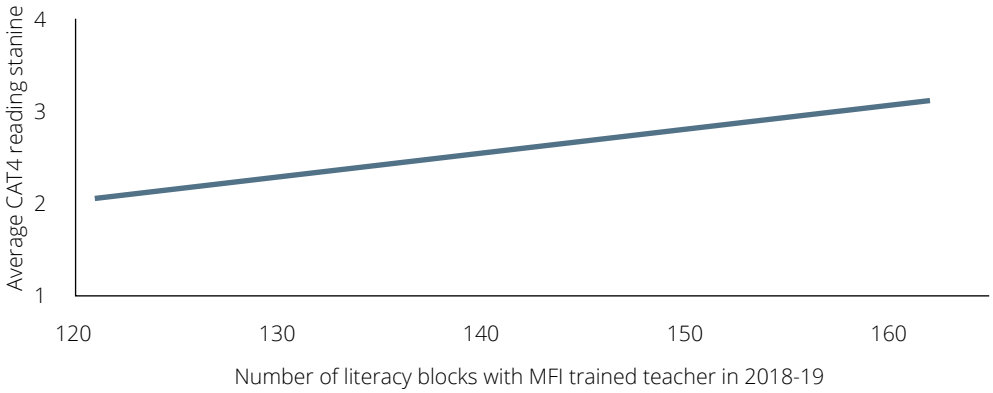


Figure 4. Relationship between literacy blocks taught by an MFI-trained teacher and class average on the CAT4

Note: Stanine range from a low of 1 to a high of 9

Consistent teaching time is lost due to teacher turnover, teachers being reassigned to other grades in the school, competing school priorities and weather.

- By the end of Year 3, only 48% of teachers had taught in the same grade since the project began.
- In 2018–19, each class had a substitute for 12 days on average; children lost over two weeks of consistent literacy teaching.
- In some schools, substitutes taught literacy for up to 53 days.
- In some schools, substitutes are not qualified teachers.

These findings highlight the particular challenges some schools face in recruiting and retaining teachers and the potential impact on children's literacy and school success.

The classroom effect

Preliminary analysis of the "classroom effect" suggests that in all grades, children progress more in some classrooms compared with others. This is most pronounced in Grade 1 – the "make or break" year in literacy learning. It is not yet clear what factors account for the classroom effect. A combination of physical features (e.g., acoustical quality), instructional factors, and characteristics of the children (e.g., high proportion of children new to the school) may be involved. As we gather more data, we will be able to account for this potentially important factor.

Children's attendance

Time spent in the 100-minute literacy block should be directly related to reading achievement. Daily attendance records at the partner schools are not precise enough to measure attendance in the block because students who arrive late to school, who miss all or part of the literacy block, are recorded as being present for at least part of the day. Consequently, for the evaluation, we measured the number of minutes each child is present for the literacy block.

Daily attendance is poor overall, and this affects attendance in the block.[X]

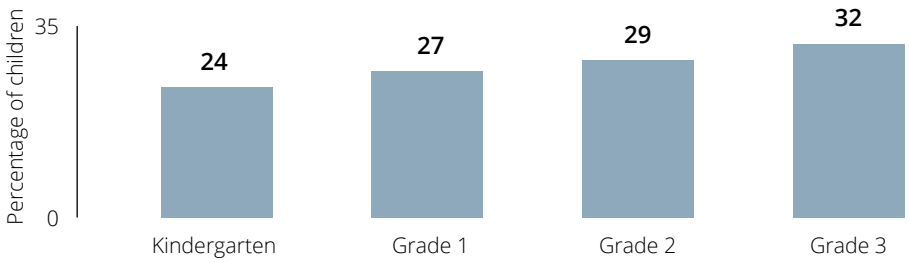


Figure 5. Percentage of children regularly attending the literacy block (90%+) by grade

- Only 28% of children across the grades regularly attended 90% or more of literacy block (2018–19).
- On average, 28% across the grades attended less than 70% of the literacy block.
- Attendance in Kindergarten and Grade 1, the critical years for establishing foundational skills in literacy, is especially poor.
- Some children lose up to one full year of literacy instruction by the end of Grade 3.

Findings are clear that the more often children attend the literacy block the higher their reading achievement, at every grade level.

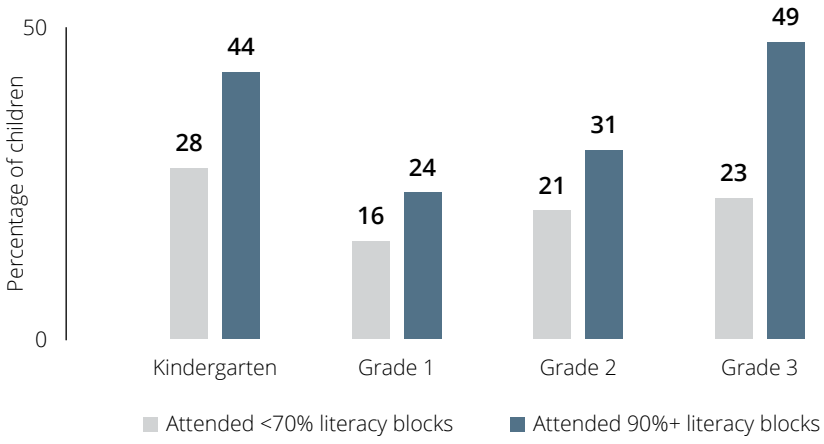


Figure 6.Percentage of children meeting or exceeding the standard (stanine 4) on CAT4 by attendance and grade

The attendance data support reports from school staff that chronic absence is not random; individual children tend to repeat the pattern every year. This is consistent with research showing chronic absenteeism can be identified as early as Grade 1. There appears to be no predictable pattern in the data about the particular days or times when individual children are absent or arrive late. However, some principals report that scheduling the literacy block first thing in the morning is improving attendance.

Consequences of poor attendance

Poor attendance has an impact not only for the child in question but for the entire class. Teachers and the MFI team report that children who arrive late disrupt the flow of instruction, which affects everyone's learning. Children who attend very irregularly also present considerable challenges for teachers who have to continually adjust instruction to meet these children's needs. Multilevel modelling supports these reports: the more children there are in a class who are new or chronically absent, the lower the average achievement is in reading for the class as a whole.[4]

Poor attendance can be compensated to some extent by consistent teaching. When poor attenders are present for the literacy block, their outcomes are better if the block is taught by an MFI-trained teacher. When attendance and inconsistency in teaching are considered together, children risk losing up to six months each year, or a full two years of instruction by the end of Grade 3.

Partner schools have a variety of school-wide incentive-based and targeted attendance strategies in place (e.g., remedial literacy instruction in the afternoon for children who do not attend regularly). They have identified factors associated with poor attendance (e.g., transportation issues, funding for nutrition programs) and developed local solutions. For example, Waywayseecappo Community School identified children's health as a major obstacle to attendance, with some children missing considerable time due to minor infections. A collaboration between MFI and Waywayseecappo First Nation is evaluating the impact of having a nurse practitioner and clinic in the school on children's attendance. Despite all of their efforts, attendance remains a major obstacle to progress for children in this project and in all areas of school.

Winner of perfect attendance contest

4 Multilevel modelling was conducted using children, classroom and school data available in 2018-19, including 729 children and 55 classrooms from Cohorts 1 and 2. The outcome was a two-level (classrooms, children) random slope (CAT4 2018) model that consisted of four children-level predictor variables and five classroom-level predictor variables. No differences were found among schools or between cohorts. This may be because the small number of schools/cohorts did not permit significant variation to be observable.

For whom is the project most effective?

Those with strong preschool literacy skills

Literacy learning starts early, before children come to Kindergarten. The Test of Preschool Early Literacy (TOPEL) is administered to children in the project at the start of Kindergarten.[XI] A standardized norm-referenced test, TOPEL is designed to measure key components known to contribute to children's literacy learning: oral vocabulary, print knowledge (e.g., knowing that reading is in the letters not pictures) and phonological awareness (e.g., knowing how to segment sounds in a words).[XII]

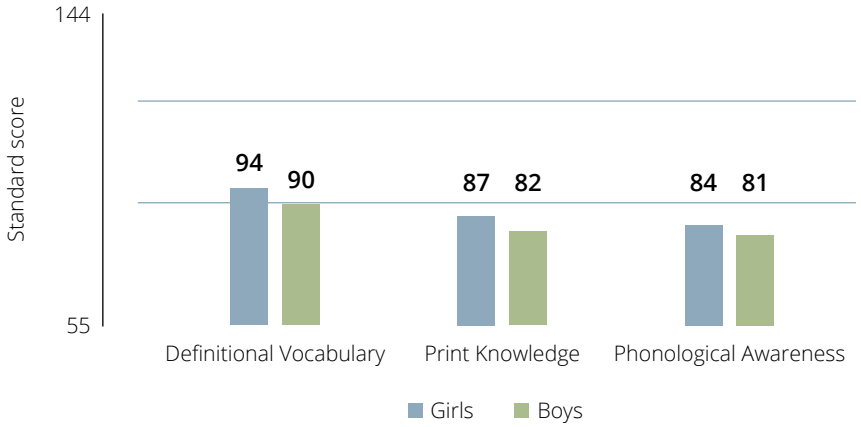


Figure 7. Average TOPEL standard scores for Kindergarten children, by subtest and gender

Note: Horizontal lines indicate average range of standard scores measured on the TOPEL (90–110)

- Girls start school with stronger early literacy skills overall than do boys.
- Most children (64%) start school with average/above-average vocabulary.
- Print knowledge and phonological awareness are less well developed than vocabulary knowledge.

Children with better-developed print knowledge (learned at home, in daycare, preschool or other settings), and to a lesser extent better-developed phonological awareness, have higher reading achievement at the end of Kindergarten.[5]

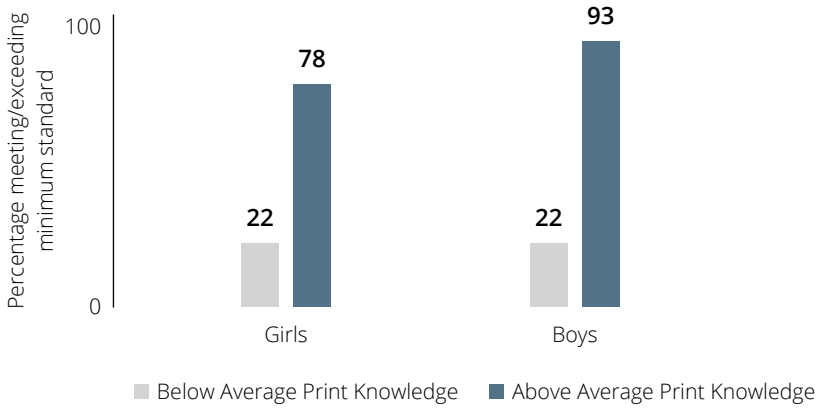


Figure 8. Percentage of Kindergarten children meeting or exceeding minimum standard on the CAT4, by print knowledge and gender at beginning of Kindergarten

5 TOPEL data are from 809 children in Cohort 1. Similar findings are observed in TOPEL data from an additional 338 children attending Kindergarten in Cohort 2 schools.

This advantage is evident through to Grade 2 and replicates outcomes in the pilot study where the advantage continued through to Grade 3.

A simple sentence repetition task (teachers say sentences of increasing length and complexity that the child repeats) revealed consistent patterns of errors or omissions (e.g., pronouns, progressive present tense). Many patterns continued to influence reading comprehension and written language throughout the grades. Teachers now model, teach and reinforce these skills in oral and written language. Teachers are also aware of those children who may require additional support for oral language development.

School staff have worked with families and staff in Head Start, preschool and nursery settings to increase awareness about the importance of exposing young children to books, songs and other activities that promote early literacy skills.

Children with special needs

In 2019, 12% of children in Cohort 1 had an individual education plan (IEP). An IEP is a written plan developed for any child identified as needing additional supports to meet their learning expectations. The plan describes special education services and/or programs for the child. The proportion of children with an IEP varied considerably across the schools, ranging from 3% to 18%.

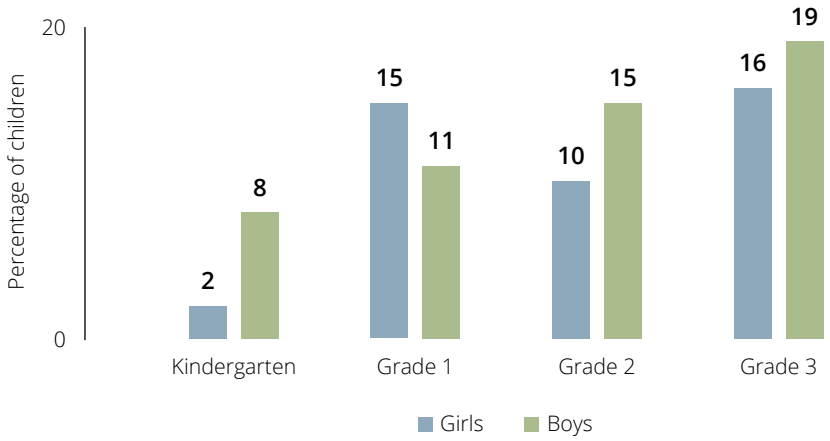


Figure 9. Percentage of children with an IEP, by gender and grade (2018–19)

- The percentage of children with an IEP increases from Kindergarten to Grade 3.
- Boys are disproportionately represented.
- Kindergarten children with an IEP have less well developed early literacy skills (on the TOPEL) compared to their peers.
- Children first identified for an IEP in Grades 1, 2 or 3 had less well developed early literacy scores (on TOPEL) when they took the test in Kindergarten.
- At each grade, children with an IEP have poorer reading achievement on the CAT4 than those without an IEP (ranging from 10 to 12 percentile ranks lower). Children with an IEP completed the CAT4 independently. The small number of children with an IEP at each grade level makes more meaningful comparisons difficult.

Early identification and intervention for children who will likely struggle with reading is critical. School staff are now using TOPEL to identify Kindergarten children who will likely struggle and may benefit from early literacy intervention. Resource teachers have been trained to administer and interpret TOPEL for school colleagues and parents.

> ***"Collecting and analyzing our data will provide our educators with clear plans for interventions."***
>
> ***Director of Education, First Nations Community***

Girls and boys

No program is equally effective for all boys or all girls. Consequently, the question in the evaluation is, For which boys and which girls is the project most effective?

- Girls start Kindergarten with better-developed early literacy skills than do boys (see Figure 7). It is these early literacy skills rather than identifying as a boy or girl that predict reading achievement.
- Girls are more confident about their reading skills than boys. It is the self-belief of being a strong reader rather than identifying as a boy or girl that influences reading achievement.[6]
- Both girls and boys who believe they are strong readers report spending more free time reading.

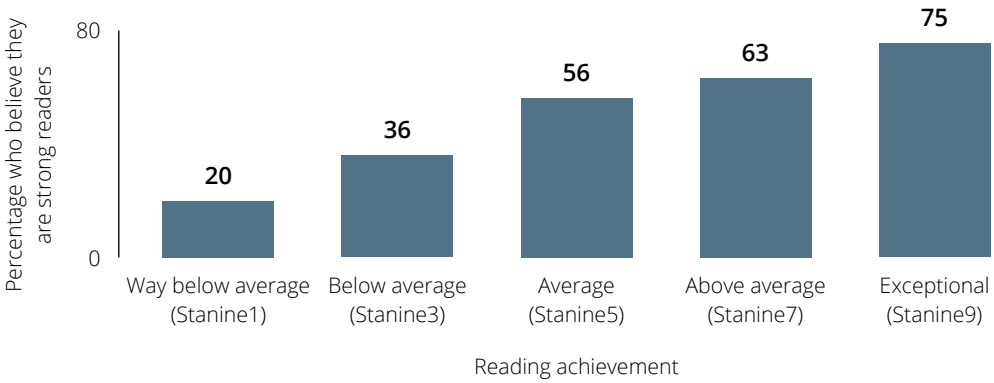


Figure 10. Relationship between reading achievement on CAT4 and the self-belief of being a strong reader

Note: Includes children in Grades 1, 2 and 3

Children engage in a variety of reading and writing activities.

6 Reading motivation is an important factor in children's literacy development, and differences between boys and girls have been reported often in research.[XIII] Teachers administered a reading motivation questionnaire to children in Grades 1, 2 and 3.[XIV]

Reading achievement, reading self-concept and practice are interrelated. Across the grades, the amount of time children report reading in their free time decreases. This is concerning as practice is critical for literacy development.

To support increased reading practice, children need easy access to a variety of quality books and other reading materials.[xv] School libraries have been established or updated, library personnel trained, and books for classroom libraries and successful home reading programs purchased. School staff work with the MFI team to select books suited to their school and community.

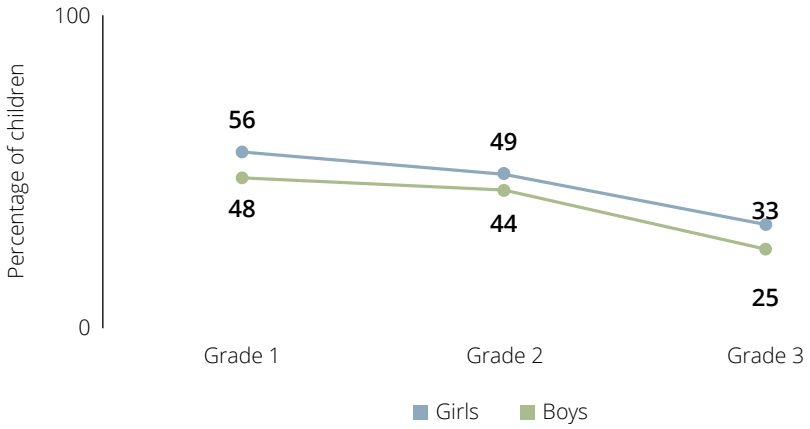


Figure 11. Percentage of children who say they spend a lot of their free time reading, by grade and gender

A pilot project with iPads for children in Grades 1 to 3 at Seabird Island Community School proved successful in encouraging children to read during school closures. Children could access books to read themselves, listen to books being read or play isolated literacy games on the devices. Here again, the interdependence between reading achievement and practice emerged: stronger readers at each grade continued to make progress reading and listening to more books than did less proficient readers. The pilot was an initial step in a continuing investigation designed to determine the effectiveness of handheld devices to support teaching and learning literacy at home and in the classroom.

Teachers show children how to use their new iPads.

Celebrating a library reopening with a ribbon-cutting and dancing.

What factors are critical to the project's success?

All the factors outlined here influence the effectiveness of the project. The goals in the evaluation are to understand how they work together and to identify their relative importance. Currently, we have insufficient data (due to COVID-19 and small sample sizes) to test the comprehensive analytic models needed to precisely determine the most critical factors. However, at this point we can say with confidence that the project is most effective:

- The longer intensive support from MFI is in place in the school
- The more often the literacy block is taught by an MFI-trained teacher
- In classes with fewer new and chronically absent children

There are differential benefits for some children.

- Those who attend regularly
- Those who start school with well-developed early literacy skills, especially understanding of how books and print work
- Those who believe they are good readers and spend more free time reading

As the evaluation continues, we will be able to identify the relative contribution of each of these and other variables included in the evaluation and determine those most critical for success.[7]

7 To date, no significant difference due to class size or school have emerged in the analysis; For technical questions regarding data and analyses, please contact Maggie Dunlop, Ph.D., Director, Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning, mdunlop@themfi.ca.

How do teachers evaluate the project?

Teaching staff were invited in spring 2021 to complete a questionnaire about their experiences in the project. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Respondents indicated overwhelming support for their professional learning during the MSLP: 100% agreed or strongly agreed that the MFI team supported their professional learning in literacy, with individual support and support for assessment especially helpful; 92% agreed or strongly agreed that weekly sharing circles and Google Classroom were very helpful.

> ***"I think that MSLP teaches teachers HOW to teach literacy, not what to teach. It has made me a better teacher because it's given me a deeper understanding of literacy conceptually, and given me the tools to increase my capacity with these concepts."***
>
> ***Classroom Teacher, First Nations School***

When asked to rate their expertise in literacy teaching, before and since joining the project, respondents reported growth in all areas, particularly about print and how words work, and their attention to language, comprehension and fluency.

Teachers made recommendations for strengthening the program, including more live collaborative sessions and feedback (using video conferences) for individual teachers while they are teaching their class during the literacy block. The project will now be adapted to reflect the teachers' feedback.

> ***"I call it a master class in early literacy."***
>
> ***Classroom Teacher, First Nations School***

Schools embrace opportunities to explore the benefits of learning outdoors.

Schools have found creative ways to ensure learning continues and students stay connected, including a variety of outdoor activities.

How has the pandemic impacted schools?

The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education in history, affecting nearly 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 countries and on all continents.[xvi] Since March 2020, 5.7 million children enrolled in schools in Canada have been affected, including all children in the 18 partner schools of the project. The pandemic threatens to leave unprecedented educational disparity in its wake, extending beyond this generation, erasing decades of progress, and robbing generations of children and youth of their fundamental right to education.

The United Nations has modelled projections of early literacy learning loss due to the pandemic.[xvii] For every month of contact time lost between a young learner and their teacher, the resulting learning loss is projected to be up to two months. The reason for this loss is because children, especially young children, tend to forget skills acquired before an interruption. Consequently, some children who have missed half a year of contact time are likely to be a full year behind.

Children in the MSLP will need more time and more help to recover lost literacy learning and continue their progress when they return to school. Schools can attenuate the impact on literacy with bold plans and actions focused on the children who have lost the most. The teaching capacity already established in the partner schools will be critical now, and the evaluation measures will allow us to quantify not only lost learning but improvement trajectories within the family of schools.

How has the pandemic impacted the project?

The focus for schools has been the health and safety of children and school staff. Intermittent school closures began in March 2020. Since that time, partner schools have been closed for an average of 100 days, ranging from 44 to 165 days. At different times, schools have been open for some children in different ways: open half time, offering online or hybrid classes (online and in-person combined), and distributing learning packages to be completed by children at home. Teachers, many who are parents, grandparents and caretakers for elders, are exhausted. Several schools reported increased enrollment as families moved their children from provincial systems home to their First Nation's school. Tracking children's attendance (when schools are open) and engagement when children are learning at home has been particularly difficult and a challenge not only for partner schools but for schools worldwide.[xviii]

How did the partnership respond?

In response to the pandemic, we adapted immediately to focus on the issues schools were suddenly facing. Our established record using technology to support the network served us well:

- Principals shared challenges and solutions (e.g., how to ensure social distancing for children on already-crowded buses).
- Teachers continued to meet virtually with the MFI team and with colleagues in other partner schools.
- Teachers engaged in exhaustive creative efforts to engage children and families in literacy, such as posting ideas for supporting literacy on social media, developing websites, visiting children outside at their homes and hosting reading competitions with prizes for families.
- Teachers worked diligently to prepare book collections and homework packages to send home; always concerned with avoiding an increase in stress and pressure on families.
- Teachers joined virtual coffee circles with the MFI team and colleagues in other schools.
- The project newsletter continued to publish, reporting success stories, strategies and encouragement from partner schools and from schools around the world.

> ***"Isolation is a pandemic in itself. It is vital that we continue to meet and support one another!"***
>
> ***Principal, First Nations School***

How was remote learning implemented?

Effective online teaching and learning has several requirements: internet access, availability of online-enabled devices to teach or learn remotely, support and preparation for teachers, and supervision for children while learning at home.[XVIII] Some partner schools distributed handheld devices to children and laptops to teachers who did not have computers at home. But many families and some teachers in the partner schools lack internet access at home (less than 30% of First Nations communities have access to high-speed internet necessary for interactive sessions).[XIX]

There is no available research on how to teach literacy to young children online. This presents several challenges to teachers and children.

Despite the challenges, teachers went to tremendous efforts to learn how to use technology to engage children with the MFI team providing professional learning support.

> ***"The iPad pilot was a lifeboat for our students during the turbulent days of the lockdown. We could have mini-lessons with our students, thereby giving them a small sense of normalcy, connectedness and continuity of learning."***
>
> ***Principal, First Nations School***

What were the broader effects of school closures for children in the project?

School closures not only interrupted literacy learning, they interfered with the provision of essential services to children in the partner schools, including those with special needs. Those children lost consistent access to school-based speech and language, occupational therapy and rehabilitative services (services not available in all partner schools even before the pandemic). Children already waiting for assessments (some wait for over a year) will wait longer now. Implementing special educational services for those children will be further delayed, exacerbating the impact of school closures.[xx]

Many children in the project rely on breakfast and lunch programs in their schools, which in turn rely on donations and grants to support those programs. Some schools delivered food to homes while schools were closed, but this was not possible in every community due to lockdowns. Not having these programs will impact the learning and progress of children when they return to school. Adequate nutrition is essential to learning, health and well-being, and schools should be able to depend on sustainable funding for food programs.[8]

A pilot project that proved exceptionally helpful during COVID-19 was designed to increase children's attendance in the literacy block. This collaboration between Waywayseecappo First Nation and MFI placed a nurse practitioner at Waywayseecappo Community School who is operating a clinic with a "starter pharmacy" and able to prescribe antibiotics from a supply at the school. Parents are encouraged to access the school-based health service for all their children, even those not of school age. The nurse practitioner immediately instituted safety procedures for the school during COVID-19 and treated children during intermittent school openings. The pilot is an example of cross-system (health and education) cooperation, increasing access to timely, quality healthcare for children to enhance their achievement and opportunities for success in school.

8 Bill C-201 was introduced by the federal government in February 2019 with the intention to work toward a universal healthy school food program.

How are we preparing for full school reopening?

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of the pandemic for children in the MSLP schools. It is clear from international research carried out during the pandemic that learning loss in literacy is greatest in the early grades, especially Kindergarten and Grade 1. These are the grades that had the poorest attendance in the literacy block before the pandemic. It is also clear that pre-pandemic inequities have been magnified.[XXI] This means that young First Nations children are among the most vulnerable in Canada and will carry a disproportionate share of the burden.

We will measure literacy learning loss when schools reopen fully, but there can be no doubt that the children will need more time and more help to regain what they lost and continue their progress.

What needs to be in place when schools reopen fully?

In January 2021, the MFI team reviewed research in education following learning disruption due to natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Katrina)[XXI] and shared principles to guide planning for school reopening with the principals in the partner schools. Since February 2021, principals have worked with the MFI team to share strategies and plans tailored to their individual school and community context. These include:

- Encouraging families to bring children to school for informal literacy assessments before school starts to ensure instruction is matched to their needs on the first day of school
- Retaining the most effective teachers and ensuring they work with the most vulnerable children
- Reducing class size and increasing classroom assistants and tutors to work under the direction of teachers
- Supporting children's social and emotional learning, health and well-being, acknowledging that many children may return to school traumatized by issues beyond the classroom (e.g., food, healthcare) that have been exacerbated by the pandemic
- Increasing instruction time (e.g., through summer camps)

Principals are sharing their plans beyond the partner schools with other First Nations schools in their region.

How are we ending the year?

Schools in Cohort 1 will enter the sustainability phase in the 2021–22 school year. In preparation, plans for sustainability are being developed collaboratively with each principal and the MFI team. The goals for partner schools are to sustain and increase capacity in early literacy education, drawing on support within the MSLP family/network and to continue to contribute their knowledge and innovations to all the schools involved.

Despite all the challenges this year, interest and demand for the project continued to grow, and six new First Nations school partners were welcomed into the project. These schools have also undergone intermittent closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we have been working with them to ensure the resources needed for the project are in place (e.g., video conferencing units, materials for assessment, books). Orientations have been completed to support a kick-start in September 2021.

> ***"We have so many students who have the potential to achieve higher levels in academics. I believe this program is a step in helping us educators build strong, confident, proud Anishnawbe students."***
>
> ***Literacy Lead Teacher, First Nations School***

We welcome them to the network that the project partners have built together. That network proved invaluable during this tempestuous year and will continue to do so in the years ahead: binding us together and strengthening our collective ability to adapt and respond on behalf of the children we all serve.

> ***"I was honoured to be a part of it, for my own professional development, but more importantly, for the success of my students."***
>
> ***Classroom Teacher, First Nations School***

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For information on this report, please contact julia.osullivan@utoronto.ca. For further information on the Models Schools Literacy project, please contact info@modelschools.themfi.ca

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