A Review of Community in Schools

Partnerships Supporting Children and Youth

in Abbotsford Schools

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Executive Summary

Community in Schools (CiS) is the term used by the Abbotsford Board of Education to describe the many partnerships between schools and local businesses, service agencies and/or community organizations. The Abbotsford Board is fortunate to have such a large contingent of partners; their efforts are visible on a daily basis in Abbotsford schools.

Early Learning
In the area of Early Learning, this report provides recommendations in a number of areas. Key recommendations include:
1. The provision of support to principals to enhance participation in early learning initiatives.
2. Deliberate collaboration with the Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee (AECC) and the Abbotsford Early Childhood Partners Table (ACCEPT) around the implementation of district goals, objectives, strategies and initiatives.
3. Clarification for community partners regarding the respective roles and responsibilities of school district staff.
4. Consideration of options to streamline the provision of StrongStart.

Formal Partnership Models
The Abbotsford School District has three established formal partnership models, the Sweeney Neighborhood Learning Center, 'Around School Funding' and Community School Societies. Recommendations were provided in each area, highlights include:

Sweeney Neighborhood Learning Center
1. Explore opportunities to expand the use of the Sweeney Center spaces to bring more services to the neighborhood.
2. Assess the provision of Neighborhood Learning Centers in other schools where space is available.
3. 'Around School' Funding
4. Consider the expansion of *Around School* funding to more schools in the district, with funding allocations that represent the quality data the district has regarding student vulnerability.
5. Provide a means to support principals in their choice of programs, services and delivery options. Consider developing a 'Partnership Tool Kit' for Principals and Vice-principals to streamline the engagement of partners in the development of programs.
6. Consider reassessing the original mandate for the *Around School* funding to look for opportunities to support social and emotional learning (SEL) and parental engagement.
7. Create broader awareness and understanding of the *Around School* programs within the community, and specifically community partners.

Community School Societies
1. The district currently provides financial support to two community school societies to serve two Families of Schools (West Abbotsford Community School Society and Central Abbotsford Community School Society). The model anticipates that each society will provide an array of supports for all schools in the neighborhood, over the range of early learning through to secondary. The current model has served to coordinate activities for children and youth well in the past; however, with an emphasis on specific challenges, such as literacy and social-emotional learning, this model appears to have limitations.
2. To provide a broader range of programs and services throughout the district, that would better serve individual students and families, reorganization was suggested. The district could consider entering strategic partnerships with a wider variety of organizations to provide programs and services within age ranges, across all school family

groupings. These organizations would provide services to schools within the organization's area of expertise, with staff familiar with the needs and priorities of the age group they were supporting.

Community Partnerships Supporting Schools

Based on extensive interviews with community partners and principals regarding barriers, gaps and challenges to supporting children and youth, a number of themes are elaborated upon in this review. Key areas include:

1. Insufficient services within the community for children and youth with mental health issues.
2. Reducing stigma for parents to accept and access services for children.
3. Lack of transportation to attend events and programs.
4. Provision of support for parents by providing information, workshops, mentoring around a myriad of issues
5. Supporting students with complex needs.
6. Augmenting services for Aboriginal children in care.
7. Increasing childcare spaces, where possible, by utilizing school sites.
8. Provision of Family Health services
9. Communication regarding initiatives, services and programs for families and service providers
10. Enhancing *Way-Finding* by ensuring that principals and families have adequate 'road maps' to plan for and partake in programs and services.
11. Responding to the impact of South Asian Culture.

This review offers nine recommendations for consideration; in key areas such as children and youth mental health, support for parents, communication, collaboration, the middle years and child care.

Concluding Thoughts

The Abbotsford school district is a forward-thinking, capably led organization with many strengths and assets. The often heard statement, "It takes a village to raise a child," is indicative of the feeling ones gets when interacting with schools and partners in Abbotsford. The organizations, agencies, ministries, and societies that contributed to this review see themselves as keen contributors to the student successes achieved. There were numerous examples of organizations allocating funds to provide services in schools, resources that would not be possible to allocate from a regular school district budget. There is no doubt the impact partners are having on early learning; elementary, middle and secondary school programs and student experiences; school connectedness; social and emotional development; and career development, to name just a few.

The district is poised to enter the next phase of partnership development, moving from cooperation and coordination, to an ultimate goal of collaboration and service integration. As the district moves forward, Abbotsford students will enjoy even more success.

Community in Schools Review

Overview

Community in Schools (CiS) is the term used by the Abbotsford Board of Education to describe the many partnerships between schools and local businesses, service agencies and/or community organizations. The Abbotsford Board is fortunate to have such a large contingent of partners; their efforts are visible on a daily basis in Abbotsford schools.

As part of the Board's commitment to ongoing improvement, the district staff undertook this review to support the Board's Strategic Plan, specifically, in response to two Strategic Plan actions:

- ✓ *an Effectiveness Review of Early Learning (0-5), and*
- ✓ *an analysis of Community Programming and its effect on enhancing school success.*

It was immediately apparent that Abbotsford has a strong legacy of community involvement in schools. Numerous partnerships have been in place for many years. In speaking with Trustees, it is obvious that these partnerships are highly valued. The Board's commitment to this review is a testament to honoring those partnerships with effective community engagement.

The review was structured to enable the district to determine if the co-location of family and student support services in schools across the district is enabling more students to experience school success. It was also expected that the review would help provide information regarding neighborhoods in need of additional services and/or programming.

Key Questions

To frame the review, key questions were structured:

Asset Inventory   Who are the community partners, ministries, agencies, volunteers and services currently working in our schools? What programs/services are being offered? For which age groups? How much overlap exists between programs and agencies? Where are the gaps?

Barriers   What barriers keep our community partners from working effectively with education? What barriers keep education from working effectively with community partners? What barriers keep parents and students from accessing and engaging in community programs and services in schools? How can we improve connection with families who find it difficult to engage with systems of support?

Priorities   What do our principals view as priorities for engaging community in schools? Why these priorities? What challenges do principals face when trying to provide community programming in schools? What is to be celebrated? What is missing?

Partnership Models   Does the current community school model, pre-school/child care model and the Strong Start model provide the most effective way to organize for service delivery? Strengths? Challenges? Enhancements needed to meet the needs of our most vulnerable families and our district mandate?

Impact   How are we currently evaluating the impact of community in schools programming? What types of enhancements are needed? Are we involved in the 'right' projects based on the goals and mandate of our Strategic Plan?

Acknowledgements

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Process

Relationship to the Strategic Plan

The Abbotsford Board of Education has clear planning principles stated in its Strategic Plan. In relationship to this review, the planning principles addressed include:

- improving equity of access across Abbotsford communities,
- seeking increased community input into planning processes,
- making decisions that are information based, principled, and data driven, and
- considering efficiency of operations and impact on academic programs when undertaking new projects.

The Strategic Plan supports the Board's vision with six specific goal areas, two of which are being addressed by this review.

Planning for the Review

To assist with the delivery of this review, two forums were held in the summer of 2013 to develop the scope and terms of reference. One forum was focused on school principals and vice-principals as the audience, while the other convened community partners. The purpose of these forums was to answer the following questions:

1. What are the key elements of high quality community programming in schools?
2. What are the system barriers for effectively engaging community in our schools across our district?
3. What are the barriers for 'invisible families'?
4. What are the critical questions to be included in the review process?

To help frame the responses to these questions, the following questions were specifically posed to the groups:

1. Recall a time when you witnessed a community of learners, leaders and partners working effectively and collaboratively to allow students to reach their potential? Please discuss.
2. What were the keys to success of this effective partnership?
3. What are the barriers for engaging 'invisible families'?
4. What are the barriers in our system to working with community?

The information from these forums informed this project and provided insights into how best to organize the interviews and how to approach data collection.

Data Gathering

Staff Consultations

There are many options to gather data relating to programs, services and partners. There are fewer options available to tease out perceptions, suggestions and concerns. In order to have a complete overview of how schools are currently engaging with their partners, the decision was made to do a full census of all schools, by way of a personal interview with each principal. Interviews were conducted onsite at each secondary school, each middle school, and a portion of the elementary schools. To facilitate scheduling, a number of elementary principals were interviewed at the district office. In all cases, Principals came prepared to review their current programs and services, offer insights and make suggestions for the future.

To supplement the information from the school level, interviews were also conducted with district staff whose responsibility includes supporting schools in the areas of: early learning, student services, aboriginal education, careers and transitions, English language learning and community use of facilities. It was obvious that schools enjoy a great deal of support from staff at the district level.

Individual, face-to-face interviews ensured that the conversation was rich, with many opportunities to solicit observations, clarify perceptions, identify concerns and discuss suggestions.

Partner Meetings

Partnerships are built on relationships, and the data gathering approach for the agencies, societies, organizations, ministries, etc. reflected this belief. All major partner groups participated in a face-to-face interview. In some instances, interviews consisted of the Executive Director of the organization, and in other instances, an organization provided a whole team of staff, supporting the range of program offerings by the organization.

Interviews ranged anywhere from 40 minutes to a little more than 2 hours duration, and in every case extensive dialogue occurred. Information was also shared at the Abbotsford Children and Youth Committee table, which generated additional interest from partner groups for an interview.

Many partners indicated sincere gratitude for the opportunity provided by the Board for input into district processes. The organizations asked that their thanks be provided to Trustees, and it is my real pleasure to do so here.

Findings

Early Learning

District Context

District planning documents refer frequently to the importance of the early years in a child's development. The BC Ministry of Education supports improving the health, social, emotional and educational outcomes for young children from birth through third grade by:

- ✓ enhancing the quality of early learning programs, and
- ✓ increasing the access to high quality early learning programs especially for young children at risk for school failure.

The Abbotsford School District Plan for Student Success contains specific actions to support improved achievement for all learners. In the area of early learning, the following initiatives are articulated:

- Enhancing social/emotional development (self-regulation)
- Developing oral language and literacy skills (0-8)
- Improving parental engagement and education
- Supporting educators in improving early learning instructional strategies
- Improving community partnerships

Abbotsford has the seventh highest vulnerability index in the Province on the Early Development Instrument (EDI) for five year olds. Vulnerability of the community's pre-school population, as measured by the Early Development Instrument indicates that 33% of Abbotsford School District children are vulnerable when they enter Kindergarten. The variability in the district EDI data from neighborhood to neighborhood indicates that actions should be targeted to meet the unique needs of schools.

The district has addressed this variability by developing an excellent rubric of factors summarizing school and neighborhood vulnerabilities, the School Composition Matrix.

> As a society, we cannot afford to postpone investing in children until they become adults, nor can we wait until they reach school age – a time when it may be too late to intervene successfully and definitely becomes more costly and complicated.
>
> (Invest in the Very Young, James Heckman, 2000).

What the Research Says[1]

The district Early Learning Imperative provides an excellent context for why the district is focusing on early learning. In relationship to factors that affect strategies to support early learning the following research is provided to help frame the recommendations that follow.

Parent Education, Parent Involvement

- ✓ Programs that combine child-focused educational activities with explicit attention to parent-child interaction patterns and relationship building appear to have the greatest impacts (From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development, Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah Phillips, 2000).
- ✓ The family is the primary and most important provider of care and education for young children. Early childhood education must start with the family and should involve the family throughout the educational process (The Early Childhood Challenge: Preparing High-Quality Teachers for a Changing Society, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, June 2004).

School Readiness - Parent Involvement

- ✓ When considered within the context of a child's environment of relationships, the concept of school readiness is not exclusively a matter of fostering literacy and number skills but must also include the capacity to form and sustain relationships with teachers, children, and other adults, and develop the social and emotional skills for cooperating with others (Young Children Develop In An Environment of Relationships, National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2003).
- ✓ Data suggests that parents who are former participants of early family education programs arrive at school participating in their children's learning and in the school community and connected to other parents (Parent Involvement in Kindergarten and Third Grade Education: What Former Participants in Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and Other Parents Report, Minnesota Center for Survey Research, 2003).

District Observations

- There is a clear focus and commitment from district staff to enhance services for young children. A significant amount of planning has been undertaken and a district wide imperative for early learning has been well developed.

- There appear to be gaps in understanding of the district's role in early learning by community partners. In some cases, a lack of information has created tension within the early learning community.

- There are a number of district staff/departments engaged in early learning, and as a result, there is some lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities among district staff. Some confusion as to which staff member is responsible a specific element of a program also exists with community partners, and in a few cases, messaging is not clear.

- StrongStart programs are operated under contract with two distinct community partners. Two organizations independently determine personnel practices, program organization, program budgets, etc. In addition, the school principal, and two key district staff, the District Principal of Early Learning and the Manager of Community Partnerships provide support to StrongStart facilitators with programming, parent engagement, professional development and facility issues.

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1 Research that Supports Investment in Family and Early Childhood Education, Karen Keller

- Principals are engaged to varying levels with early learning programs and services within their schools; some principals are highly engaged, while others less so. Community partners indicate that they would like to see Principals be more of a catalyst for early learning, creating linkages between Kindergarten teachers and early childhood educators operating programs at the school.

- When some organizations change schedules, it sometimes impacts other programs occupying that space, such as StrongStart. This creates a barrier for families who may not have the ability to adapt to the new schedule.

- The absence of ECE trained substitute staff for StrongStart

- The four Early Learning Outreach Workers are supported by two organizations, the district and Abbotsford Community Services.

- Ready Set Learn is supported district wide, and in so doing creates consistency among elementary schools. This model appears to work well.

- Transitioning to K is supported by a wide variety of agencies, to the benefit of Abbotsford children.

- In-service and staff training in the early years has been provided by the district, in some cases including child care and pre-school providers, and in other cases, focused on StrongStart and Kindergarten staff. There was some concern expressed by community partners around the lack of communication, coordination and planning for in-service and training opportunities. Specific issues included a lack of notice; scheduling conflicts, particularly for staff who cannot be released from duties during the school day; and the omission of some partners.

- The Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee (AECC) Early Childhood Development Strategic Plan is under review. Building a renewed strategic plan for the community will assist with the coordination of programs and services among partners moving forward.

Recommendations/Considerations

- Consider the development of a plan to orient, engage and support principals to higher levels of engagement in early learning initiatives. Many principals are confused regarding rules for childcare and pre-school, rules well beyond the district facility staff's control. Orientation for principals in this area would alleviate a good deal of misunderstanding.

- Use opportunities at existing Abbotsford community tables to share the district Early Learning Imperative, and to discuss options for the district's leadership in early learning.

- Collaborate with the Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee (AECC) and the Abbotsford Early Childhood Partners Table (ACCEPT) around the implementation of district goals, objectives, strategies and initiatives. Provide whatever leadership feasible to conclude the Early Childhood Development Strategic Plan for the community.

- Consider more deliberate collaboration with community partners around early learning staff in-service and training to reach all partners, especially childcare and pre-school partners.

- Clarify for community partners the respective roles and responsibilities of school district staff.

- Consider options to streamline the provision of StrongStart, including the role of the principal in day-to-day supervision of the program, supporting roles for district staff, and eventually leading to the potential reduction on the reliance for outside contracts to deliver the program.

Formal Partnership Models

Sweeney Neighborhood Learning Center

The Sweeney Neighborhood Learning Center provides a rich opportunity to engage community in the school. Housing the community library and partners, including: The United Way, Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee, Abbotsford Community Services (ACS), Trinity Western University, Ministry of Children and Family Development, City of Abbotsford and Fraser Health, this purpose built space was funded by the Ministry of Education as part of the capital project.

Current programs and services include:

- *Supervised visits hosted by Abbotsford Community Services*
- *Fraser River Counseling Services*
- *Fraser Health immunization and dental varnishing*
- *Vibrant Abbotsford Harvest Boxes*
- *Fraser Valley Youth Society drop-in support group*
- *City of Abbotsford Zumba and dance classes*
- *City of Abbotsford Toddler time drop in*
- *Family nights hosted by the city*
- *Special events (e.g. senior computer classes)*

District Observations

- The space is an outstanding example of incorporating community facilities in schools. It is functional, attractive and has a variety of program delivery and program administrative space.

- Currently, some space is underutilized; for example, the spaces allocated to the City of Abbotsford are not programmed Sundays, Mondays, Wednesday and Friday am, nor most evenings after 6pm. Other program spaces are operational for only a portion of a day, or week.

Recommendations/Considerations

- Explore opportunities to expand the use of the Sweeney Center spaces to bring more services to the neighborhood. Perhaps current tenants could partner with others to expand program offerings, or lease arrangements could be altered to support new tenants.

- Assess the needs of children and families in this neighborhood, and determine if the Sweeney Center can support programs and services for other schools within the family.

- Explore this model in other schools where space is available, such as Rick Hansen Secondary School.

'Around School' Funding

In November 2011, the Board approved an allocation of $300,000 for after school programs for students. Ten elementary schools (Alexander, Centennial, Dormick Park, Godson, Jackson, John Maclure, Margaret Stenersen, Ross, Ten-Broeck, Terry Fox), and two middle schools (Abbotsford and Colleen and Gordie Howe) were selected and have completed a two-year Pilot Program. Four schools were added in September, 2013 (Roberta Bondar, Aberdeen, Matsqui and Barrowtown).

The following were the district's expectations to guide program development:
- Enhance student achievement in the areas of literacy and numeracy
- Support skill-development activities that are sequential, active, focused, and explicit.
- Organize with a minimum of one hour of intervention, for a minimum of three times per week
- Develop a two-year renewable plan
- Incorporate clear processes for identifying students for inclusion
- Provide empirical and anecdotal evidence of student growth; academic and social-emotional

District Observations

- In every instance, Principals saw the *Around School* funding as a key means to enhance services for children.

- Principals and Vice-Principals have taken the leadership role in developing the programming, working with community partners and supporting the staff assigned to the programs. Some principals were only aware of a few of the potential agencies and organizations that could provide services.

- A wide variety of programming options, including before school, after school, Spring Break and Summer Breaks have been offered in some schools; other schools appear to be having difficulty to bring some programs to fruition.

- Principals are spending considerable time and effort to develop an *Around School* program.

- Both partners and existing support staff were engaged to provide programs and/or deliver services and where existing Teaching Assistants and Youth Care Workers have been assigned additional hours for the program it was noted that they provide the continuity between classroom instruction and the *Around School* program.

Recommendations/Considerations

- If possible, consider expanding *Around School* funding to more schools in the district, with funding allocations that represent the quality data the district has regarding student vulnerability.

- When reviewing the *Around School* program for 13/14 (in progress) identify principals who can provide mentorship to their colleagues regarding program implementation.

- Provide a means to support principals in their choice of programs, services and delivery options. Consider developing a 'Partnership Tool Kit' for Principals and Vice-principals to streamline the engagement of partners in the development of programs. Elements of the 'Tool Kit' could include: listing of partners with contact information, description of partner specialties, exemplars of programs that have been successfully offered, descriptions of constraints regarding community partners, suggestions regarding supporting the individuals assigned to the programs, etc.. The 'Tool Kit' would address way-finding issues, reduce duplication, and bring clarity and focus to this initiative.

- Consider reassessing the original mandate for the *Around School* funding to look for opportunities to support social and emotional learning (SEL) and parental engagement. This may help to address the concerns expressed regarding levels of services in the area of children and youth mental health and provide opportunities to build parent capacity to support their children.
- Create broader awareness and understanding of the *Around School* programs within the community, and specifically community partners.

Community School Societies

The district currently provides financial support to two community school societies to serve two Families of Schools (West Abbotsford Community School Society and Central Abbotsford Community School Society). The model anticipates that each society will provide an array of supports for all schools in the neighborhood, over the range of early learning through to secondary.

District Observations

- The corollary to the success of the *Around School* funding is that without the *Around School* funding, the community school societies would not be offering a number of their programs.
- Schools not served by the community school societies feel underserved by the current model. Equity of support for children and youth was mentioned a number of times.
- Each of the community school societies has capabilities in programming within discreet age levels. Neither society was viewed as having expertise at secondary, and both were viewed has having challenges to engage effectively in middle schools. Services by both agencies are mainly focused on one or two age levels, as depicted in the chart below (darkest colors indicating the majority of services, lighter tones indicating lower levels of service, cross hatching indicating no services):

Age Level	Central Abbotsford Community School	West Abbotsford Community School	Remainder of the 5 Families
Early Learning			
Elementary			
Middle			
Secondary			

- In some cases, a minimum numbers of students required by community partners to initiate programs represent challenges, such as 12 students registered for a specific program. In some cases, beneficial programs, which were envisioned to support the goals of the '*Around School*' funding did not proceed due to small numbers of children.

- Fees for some programs are considered to be a barrier to participation.
- The current model has served to coordinate activities for children and youth well in the past. With an emphasis on specific challenges, such as literacy and social-emotional learning, this model appears to have limitations.
- The district has the expertise to effectively engage with individual community partners.

Recommendations/Considerations

- It is recommended that the district consider organizing by age level, serving all of the district's families and schools, to meet the unique needs of particular age groups of students. By partnering with individual organizations in a strategic manner, the district can benefit from those that are best suited, by virtue of having significant expertise, within an age level. For example, some organizations have significant experience with early learning, parenting, mentoring, youth and child development, etc. and the district could capitalize on those assets. A broader range of programs and services throughout the district would better serve individual students and families.

- Graphically, this approach would be represented below:

Age Level	Abby	Bateman	Hansen	Mouat	Rurals	Yale	District Catchment
Early Learning	Select partners from those with most expertise in child development, social and emotional learning, early learning, child care, parent engagement, etc.						
Elementary	Select partners from those with most expertise in child development, social and emotional learning, literacy, numeracy, children's mental health, parent engagement, etc.						
Middle	Select partners from those with most expertise in adolescent development, literacy, numeracy, social and emotional learning, social media, youth mental health, parent engagement, substance use, etc.						
Secondary	Select partners from those with most expertise in adolescent development, social and emotional learning, social media, youth mental health, parent engagement, substance use, etc.						

The district could enter strategic partnerships with a wider variety of organizations to provide programs and services within age ranges, across all school family groupings. These organizations would provide services to schools within the organization's area of expertise, with staff familiar with the needs and priorities of the age group they were supporting. This model would reduce the number of partners involved with some programs making for efficiencies for district staff and school principals and would enhance the level of expertise offered in programs and services.

Community Partnerships Supporting Schools

Context

Statements from district work plans eloquently describe how services ought to be delivered. "It is the vision of all school and district based administrators to create schools that are responsive to student needs; that personalize programming; that engage students intellectually, socially and emotionally; that engage students in the assessment process; that engage students in relevant, real world problems, that embrace the technology in the classroom; that connect students to their passions."[2] The thoughtful engagement of partners is critical to supporting this work.

The District Achievement Plan highlights the significant initiatives in place to support children, youth and families. Community partners recognized the commitment to the district to collaborate, and examples that highlight the district's responsiveness include:

- ✓ Alternatives to Suspension: Through a partnership with the YMCA the district offers suspended students a more supportive alternative by serving students in a structured program
- ✓ REACH Program: An outreach teacher and youth care worker work with the most vulnerable students to provide access to an off-campus, inter-agency services that addresses their needs

The focus for the review of partnerships supporting schools is shaped by the following question. Does the district have the right programs, in the right places, at the right times, with the right partners, for the right children and families?

Barriers - What the Research Says

Engaging parents effectively in preventive services (in schools, family centers and children's services) has become a key issue for policy makers and service providers. "Engagement and inclusion are particularly important for preventive services because, unlike more intensive 'crisis' services where there is often a degree of compulsion, preventive services usually rely on parents actively seeking help or voluntarily accepting help offered to them."[3]

Katz et al reviewed barriers to inclusion and successful engagement of parents in services. This research stresses that the vast majority of barriers are not of parents' making. Parents generally want to receive help if it is appropriate to their needs. Some specific parental groups are less likely to access services, namely:
- fathers
- disabled parents
- parents of teenagers
- minority ethnic families
- asylum-seeking parents
- homeless or peripatetic families
- rural families

> **Barriers to inclusion**—factors about parents or the context in which they are living which make them less likely to access services (from Katz et al, 2007).

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[2] Assistant Superintendents' Office, Work Plan Service Description

[3] Katz, I.; La Placa, V.; Hunter, S. (2007) Barriers to Inclusion and Successful Engagement of Parents in Mainstream Services. Joseph Rowntree Trust

The reasons for lack of access are many and varied, but Katz describes three basic types of barriers to involvement:

Physical and practical barriers
These factors are centered on simple issues of access. Some parents do not know that certain services are available and therefore do not access them for this reason; finding ways of ensuring that they have this knowledge becomes crucial. For some parents there are issues based on physical access, perhaps due to time pressures such as working multiple jobs which do not fit in with the working day of a school, or where public transport links are poor making easy and affordable access very difficult. Parents with disabilities may experience issues if buildings do not have disabled access.

Social barriers
In some cases, there may be a cultural expectation amongst some parents that schools can be trusted to educate their children and that education is therefore the responsibility of teachers. In addition, there may be language barriers, either real or perceived, which again put parents off engaging with service provision. It is also highlighted by Katz et al (2007) that those in acute poverty suffer from higher levels of both depression and stress which may lead to less interaction with schools as individuals feel unable to cope with the issues which might arise for their children.

Stigma
Some parents will be unwilling to engage with services, as they might be concerned that they will be labeled as failing parents. Others might be generally suspicious of service provision, perhaps due to negative experiences in the past. Research suggests that it is perhaps an issue of perspective, i.e. by labeling families "hard to reach" it pathologizes their actions, thereby releasing organizations from responsibility.

Overcoming Barriers

Katz et al (2007) suggest a number of potential strategies that have been successful in different contexts that might help overcome barriers to inclusion. Many of these elements are embedded in the recommendations contained in this report.

Personal relationships between staff and users
By fostering positive and long lasting relationships between staff and parents, there is the opportunity to build trust and also to develop positive approaches to negotiating issues.

Practical Issues
In some cases where the perceived need for help is seen as too low level, parents might be turned away as they fall below a 'threshold of provision'. This then negatively impacts on levels of trust, and might lead to a situation becoming acute at a point in the future. Another practical issue is that of operational times. If some parents work and are unable to access the school during the normal school day, how can they be supported?

Service Culture
The way the parent 'sees' the provision is very important. Schools can be perceived as intensely hierarchical organizations where there are unequal power relationships. For some parents this is a frightening prospect, particularly when the teachers are seen as experts who have a great deal of power. In addition, schools can also be seen as unresponsive and bureaucratic which makes positive, genuine relationships difficult to foster.

Consultation, information and targeting
The manner in which schools interact with some groups of parents needs to be given careful and considered attention. For example, when letters, reports etc. are sent home, are language barriers considered, or is the reading level of the information calculated to ensure that it is accessible to all parents? If this is not considered, information might well be excluding some families from consultation.

Parents are also frequently critical of services which they perceive as being uncoordinated and fragmented. Joined-up support services are far more likely to engage with parents. For example, research has consistently found that parents are

very resistant to repeated assessments and to having to tell their story again and again to different professionals (Cleaver *et al.*,1999).

More generally, fears about a lack of privacy and confidentiality can act as major disincentives to parents engaging with services. Many people are anxious about participating in groups because they do not want others (in addition to those running the services) to know about their problems. For example, Evans and Harris (2004) found that privacy was a major issue for mental health service users. Service delivery should, meanwhile, be responsive to the different needs of particular service users. For example, Moran *et al*. (2004) argue that parenting programs need to provide a good match between parents' level of need and the length and frequency of the intervention. Their review of evaluations showed that longer, more intensive programs were more appropriate for parents experiencing severe difficulties, while shorter, low-level interventions were more effective with parents experiencing less serious problems.

Schools are challenged to promote engagement; there are still parents and families for whom the barriers to inclusion continue to prevent access to the relationships that lead to more positive outcomes for their children[4].

The research strongly suggests that the vast majority of families for whom this is an issue want to support their children as well as they can. This suggests again the question as to the degree to which the families or the school is the hard to reach element of the equation; in many cases it might be a bit of both.

> Given the barriers faced by parents, we may need to ask the question…
>
> *Are these hard to reach families, or are they experiencing the frustrations of dealing with hard to reach services?*

Abbotsford Community Partner Perceptions

Barriers

Many partners communicated that valuable programs, services and initiatives are not reaching the families that would most benefit. Specific barriers encountered by community partners included the following:

- A significant barrier for the delivery of programs and services is seen to be language
- Cultural considerations for South Asian families can produce barriers to accessing services
- Poverty
- Level of parent education and parent literacy
- Transportation for children and youth to get to programs, especially those that are only offered at only at one center
- Bussing for children and youth to get to breakfast and after school programs
- Growing number of families with complex needs, especially parent mental health issues
- Youth living in difficult home circumstances, or without homes
- Family drug and alcohol issues
- Single parent considerations

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[4] Ofsted (2013) Unseen children: Access and Achievement 20 Years On

Overlap

Partners consistently indicated that there is little overlap of specific programs and services, particularly considering the size of the community and the plethora of agencies, societies and organizations supporting children and families. Where overlap does occur, it is generally very obvious, with collaboration, can be addressed.

The community planning tables support discussion regarding programming, and contribute toward efficiencies in some areas. SWIS was a clear example of how to collaboratively design and deliver a program, and is viewed a real success story.

Notwithstanding the efforts made to collaborate, there were specific examples of programs and services where duplication might have been avoided through more dialogue at a community table or among partners prior to program establishment. There was recognition that some programs are delivered by more than one agency, for example, StrongStart, *Around School* funded programs, etc. and a sense that this was not efficient, and led to differing approaches and standards.

Some programs usurped others, such as *Around School* funding delivered by Central Abbotsford Community Schools Society, caused Hand-in-Hand to lose clients for their after-school care program. Unintended consequences of program expansion, development need careful consideration prior to program implementation.

Gaps

Partners consistently indicated that there are a number of gaps within the community. While articulating the gaps offered below, care is provided to ensure that these are gaps in quantity or availability of a service, not the quality of services which are currently available. Gaps articulated by community partners include (in no order importance):

⟹ Child Care in Abbotsford Schools to reduce wait lists and support the early learning agenda
⟹ Provision of social - emotional support for children and their families
⟹ Lack of programming and services for children aged 6-11 throughout the district
⟹ Services need to be located in the school or neighborhood where families can access them. Failing that, transportation support needs to be considered. This comment reflects addressing a significant barrier for families
⟹ Youth employment and meaningful volunteer experiences
⟹ Sustaining a course of action within the community regarding the Developmental Assets and the Child and Youth Friendly Initiative
⟹ Literacy planning, with a focus on family literacy and early literacy
⟹ Adult mental health services
⟹ Children and youth mental health services, ability to provide either early intervention and/or prevention is lacking; services for children ages 6 – 12 a significant gap

⟹ Mental health literacy for staff and parents
⟹ Conflicts regarding the use of gyms at the pinch point of 3 - 6pm
⟹ Addressing the increasing complexity of the needs of children and families
⟹ Provision of CALM(Self-Regulation curriculum) in every elementary school
⟹ Increased StrongStart programs
⟹ More trauma informed approaches, rather than medicating symptoms. Provision of professional development for principals and teachers regarding trauma informed approaches

⇒ Services for mildly mentally challenged students

⇒ Middle school gaps addressing children's social, emotional and mental health needs

⇒ Training of school staff and parents related to supporting autistic children

⇒ Offering services during instruction time, such as mentoring, are very difficult to schedule, as a result of protecting instructional time. Consider benefits of mentoring in reducing anxiety, when making decisions regarding student schedules

⇒ Lack of space at schools that are very full

⇒ Services for LGBTTQ youth through school referrals, initiatives

Programs and Services In Schools

Barriers, Gaps, Overlap, Challenges and Priorities

From the information gathered through interviews with principals, a picture of the barriers that exist for children and families, gaps in services that are readily identifiable, duplication and overlap of programs and challenges at the school level were identified. Further, principals articulated some of the priorities that they felt would be worth exploring in the future.

Themes Within Each School Family

The information regarding barriers, gaps, overlaps and challenges are presented within each school family. When observations, perceptions and priorities involved solely district decisions, those comments were provided to District Leadership Staff for their attention.

Abbotsford Senior Family

Barriers, Challenges, Gaps and (Overlap)
Enhanced supports in the area of children and youth mental health, especially, suicide, depression, and anxiety
Support for Aboriginal children and youth in care
Recreation opportunities for Secondary Youth in the neighborhood, greater no cost recreation opportunities, enhanced role for the city
Enhanced access to family health services and or clinics
Enhancing family literacy

Families without transportation, a barrier for elementary families in particular, significantly impacting summer school offerings
Transient families - lack of connectedness to a school
Impact of poverty
Supporting immigrant families
Organizations challenged to secure and supervise staff, retain quality staff over time
Quality after school activities for elementary students

Priorities
Ensure the Neighborhood Learning Center operates as a true partnership
Academic supports for Middle School students
Address significant mental health needs of children and youth
Building parent capacity, including Family Literacy programs, financial and health literacy
Parent Outreach, including general parent workshops, specific information sessions, information regarding student expectations/deportment, etc.
District strategy to approach and serve underserved families
Build greater connections with families, beyond StrongStart (which is working very well)

Rick Hansen Family

Barriers, Challenges, Gaps and (Overlap)
Impacts related to South Asian culture, values, language, role of parents
Reducing perceived stigma related to children and youth with learning disabilities
Parent Partnerships, engaging parents and grandparents more
Cost free recreation for middle school students, especially after school
Parental awareness/promotion of current programs
Enhancing school-home relationships
Mitigating extended absences of students
Acceptance of early learning/strong start as 'part of school' by all staff
Reducing Transportation barriers

Priorities
Consider the potential of a mental health hub at Rick Hansen Secondary
Provide Restorative Justice, relevant to the South Asian community
Provision of Parenting Programs K- 8 to establish a base for parent understanding and engagement with the school. Intentional design to engage South Asian parents and grandparents
Partnership with the City to offer more recreational programming
Schools to work together to address gaps and priorities in English Language Learning
Explore child care (before and after school) need 6 am to 6pm during some portions of the year
Enhancing parent literacy, ELL classes for parents

Robert Bateman Family

Barriers, Challenges, Gaps and (Overlap)
Strategies to address social media issues
Children and youth mental health services, supporting youth with anxiety, preventative approaches to children's emotional and social well being
Expand IMPACT services

Expand Alternatives to Suspension Program
Enhance level of support in the area of therapies, OT PT
Recognize that some families are struggling with finances, especially costs of before and after school care
Enhance parent advocacy and way finding
Recognize that family needs are often hidden, build trust

Priorities
Expand Alternative to Suspension Program to serve higher numbers of secondary students in East Abbotsford, could also serve middle schools
Enhance Drug Prevention services
Increase Big Brother and Big Sister mentorships
Enhance services in the area of child and youth mental health
Enhance child care opportunities and expand StrongStart
Support building resiliency at earlier ages, e.g. Mind Up programming

W. J. Mouat Family

Barriers, Challenges, Gaps and (Overlap)
Increased spaces in Alternative to Suspension Program
Children and youth mental health, little prevention, high levels of anxiety
Adolescent Day Treatment Unit not available locally
Impact of any parent mental health issues on children
Impact of cultural issues
Recognize that money is a barrier for fee programs
Large amount of time involved by principal to coordinate
Single parent considerations
Facility scheduling needs to support children, not first come first served.
Ineffective student management by partner's staff
Impact of any parental drug/alcohol use issues on children
Additional Services for Aboriginal children in care
Little programming supports for K- 2 overall
Engaging South Asian parents
Mitigate attendance issues
Bussing impacts after school activities

Priorities
Enhancing Character Initiative
Supporting families
Enhancing homework clubs to support students
Preventative children and youth mental health programs and services
Early literacy interventions

Yale Family

Barriers, Challenges, Overlap and Gaps
Single parent struggles
Impact of poverty
Children with mental health issues, especially anxiety, many underserved children and youth. Insufficient staffing to

serve children in a window of opportunity, especially when dealing with anxiety.
Supporting parenting competencies and literacy
Local services for Adolescent Day Treatment Unit
Consistency with personnel working in agency programs
Alternatives to Suspension only serves secondary, consider expanding
Community supports for moderately behavior disordered students,
Establishing the trust of parents
Impact of family mental illness
Hunger
Transportation barriers
Enhancing supports for aboriginal children in care
Lack of services in schools not designated as community schools
Male role models supporting children and youth

Priorities
Enhance Care Teams for complex needs children
Increased child and youth mental health services, preventative and increased therapy
Increased focus in the middle school to identify children's issues and support them at that age level
Increased opportunities for parenting education
Increase mediation services, ACS, CYRUS and YMCA
More therapeutic services

Rural Schools Family

Barriers, Challenges, Overlap and Gaps
Transiency of families
Little opportunity to structure activities after school due to bussing
Awareness of cultural considerations
Impact of language barriers
Hunger
Community-in-schools takes considerable time, assess administration time required
Enahanced communication through improved sharing of information
Single parent considerations
Before and after school care
Children's social-emotional support, especially anxiety and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder
Higher support for transitioning between schools for aboriginal children
Support for literacy interventions
Increased StrongStart
Money is an issue for some families
Ensure HUB is not one size fits all, consider schools situations
Appears to be silos within the district related to serving students

Priorities
Coordinated district program development for community-in-school initiatives
Transitioning of students to Grade 8
District support to secure additional services/partners

District Catchment Family

Barriers, Challenges, Overlap and Gaps
Families concerned with appearances, hiding and shielding issues K-8, seek virtual experiences
Cultural issues, female roles, focus on male children
Children and youth mental health services, difficult to serve students in crisis, many high risk students not receiving support, especially grades 3-8, student anxiety
Alternative to Suspension program tailored to South Asian students
Way finding for families
Families without technology is a barrier for accessing AVS
Gaps in services for grades 6-8
Parent financial pressure
Making connections to community, when unfamiliar with the players
Preventative mental health services
Child care spaces
Services for aboriginal children in care
Elementary schools with no space for additional programs or services

Priorities
District leadership to improve services related to mental health
Behavior supports for south Asian population on west end
Re-imaging of AVS to serve more district students, underserving Yale and Traditional students
Parent awareness around mental health, anxiety
Partnerships that enhance social connections for students and higher order thinking
Increased after school programs for schools without Around School funding
Increasing linkages to community through events
Align existing child care with school

Celebrations

Many examples were given of successes and assets to be celebrated. They are included here as a way of exemplifying the rich partnerships and programs. They are listed alphabetically, and not in order of importance or location.

Abbotsford Police Department Liaison services
Abby Virtual School is part of a district safety net for students
Around School funding has increased the connectedness of students
Around School funding that has permitted existing gaps to be filled
Breakfast programs
Community in Schools initiative
Community Library
Connections with Community
District awareness of issues and responsiveness
District Leadership, Vision and Supports
District Multi-cultural worker
Grandparent support
Inclusion
International Student Program
LSS Team transitioning from elementary, and from middle to secondary
Parent involvement
Relationship with the arts community in Abbotsford

School Composition Matrix is a real asset within the district
Services at CORE
Services of Manager of Community Partnerships position
Support of District senior leadership
Support within the 'Family'
Traverse Program

District Themes

To give a sense of the overarching priorities, district themes have been summarized.

⇒ Children and Youth Mental Health Services - Insufficient services within the community for children and youth with mental health issues. This is an issue of access to services for children, especially in the area of anxiety. It also speaks to a lack of capacity in the area of prevention, the ability to provide services in a timely window of need and support for parents with basic information and an increased knowledge base. In every school family, this was noted as an important, even critical gap, and as a result, a pressing priority.

⇒ Stigma – Stigma exists regarding the academic needs of children and the provision of special education services, and regarding home and family issues that are impacting children and parents. Reducing stigma for parents to accept and access services for children is seen as a priority.

⇒ Transportation – In a number of schools, parents lack transportation to attend events and programs. Exacerbating this problem are district transportation services which support families who live beyond the walk distances, attend District Catchment schools or who are attending an out of catchment school. Children and youth must 'catch the bus' thereby severely limiting the before and after school offerings for those children.

⇒ Support for Parents – There were overwhelming examples of the need to provide information, workshops, mentoring for parents around a myriad of issues: parenting in general, children and youth mental health, social media, how to engage with the school system, how to navigate services for children, literacy, how to advocate for your child, etc.

⇒ Serving Students with Complex Needs – children are presenting with very complex needs, requiring complex plans, and supports. Expertise is available within the community and well regarded, but with limited availability. There is a strong desire to serve children at earlier ages, with higher levels of services.

⇒ Aboriginal Children In Care – schools indicate a desire for enhanced services for Aboriginal children in care

⇒ Childcare – Increasing childcare spaces within the community, by utilizing school sites. Where space permits, and when district capacity can support, many schools would be able to house childcare, providing benefit for families in the neighborhood.

⇒ Health Services – Ensuring that all members of families have access to basic health, vision and dental services.

⇒ Communication – increasing the quantity and quality of communications regarding initiatives, services and programs for families and service providers.

⇒ Way Finding – Ensuring that principals and families have adequate 'road maps' to plan for and partake in programs and services.

⇒ Responding to the impact of South Asian Culture – Work to overcome barriers related to language, build understanding and capacity around effective responses to South Asian values. Strategies to engage grandparents.

⇒ The position of Manager of Community Partnerships was applauded in the consultations. The role permits the building of relationships, provides critical way finding within the school system and with partners, supports the resolution of problems on a daily basis, and is the single repository in the district of existing partnerships.

Recommendations/Considerations

The Abbotsford school district is a forward-thinking, capably led organization with many strengths and assets. The leadership offered at both the school and district level is focused on children and youth and their success. There are thoughtful and well-researched plans in place to support students and partners committed to supporting Abbotsford's citizens. These recommendations are offered for consideration.

> 'As every high jumper knows, it is sometimes more difficult to achieve improved performance when the bar is already high.'
>
> - Kevin Godden,
> Superintendent of Schools

A. *Children and Youth Mental Health Services*

Consider options available to work towards a community wide strategy to begin to address the significant gaps within the community regarding children and youth mental health. This is an area for district collaboration with other organizations, not an area for the district to assume responsibility. Initial areas could include addressing anxiety and strategies to enhance prevention.

B. *Support for Parents*

Consider a strategy to systemically enhance parent engagement and augment parent capacity by utilizing district and community resources. Specific elements could include: information sessions, workshops, formal parenting programs, mentoring for parents. Topics could include: parenting in general, children and youth mental health, social media, engagement with the school system, how to navigate services for children, literacy, how to advocate for your child, etc. The District Parent Advisory Council could be a resource and partner in this area.

This project could be undertaken with a view to reducing stigma related to accessing programs and services. Where appropriate, ways to support and engage South Asian parents and grandparents should be given special attention.

C. *Communications*

District Initiatives - Representatives of organizations indicated a desire to have a greater, and more timely understanding of district initiatives, such as the initiative to increase the StrongStart programs throughout the district, the Early Learning Imperative, District Literacy Planning, etc.

If the district were to establish a regular communication initiative, structured specifically around key topics of interest to community partners, it could be shared at community planning tables, when district staff attend those meetings, sent out electronically, if staff are not able to update partners, provided to principals to share broadly within their constituent groups, posted on the district web site, etc. They goal would be to enable communications specifically to community partners at the earliest stage of developing a direction or initiative. This would have a significant impact on increasing transparency.

Communication regarding Programs, Resources and Services— organizations are seeking vehicles to 'get the word out' about programs, services, resources for youth and their parents. It is recommended that the district clarify appropriate ways for organizations to get their programs into the hands of parents, what is appropriate for school newsletters, distribution through email lists, publication on school and/or district websites, etc. A district wide strategy would be of great benefit to partners.

D. *Collaboration/ Recognition of Expertise*

Endeavor to make collaboration a natural process; particularly in the area of early learning. Assess community and district processes that would be beneficial to enhance collaboration and utilize available community expertise to the fullest. Collaboration is successful when it is conscious, focused on locating synergies among partners and supported by high levels of transparency.

E. *Facility Access/Scheduling*

To ensure that the needs of organizations, school principals and operations staff are all taken into account regarding facility access, consideration should be given to establishing an ad hoc working group consisting of the Manager for Community Partnerships, facilities staff and interested principals. This group could review the best processes for allocating facilities, especially large spaces like multipurpose rooms and gymnasiums; how to ameliorate issues with program conflicts; the most appropriate timing to schedule school use (currently June); best approaches to building security; etc.

F. *Abbotsford Community Literacy Plan*

The Abbotsford Community Literacy Plan describes goals in aboriginal literacy, with links to the District Aboriginal Enhancement Agreement and goals supporting adult literacy, with links to programs and services in English as an Additional Language and services provided to adults by formal institutions in the community. Although the Literacy plan references the Abbotsford Early Childhood Committee, the plan does not contain goals or objectives in early learning. A key component of adult literacy is family literacy, and in this area, the Community Literacy Plan would benefit from goals and objectives to support parent literacy.

Further, assess district representation on the Literacy Matters Abbotsford Committee with a view to ensure appropriate linkages to the Board's strategic direction around early learning and the support possible to parents in the area of family literacy.

G. *Middle Years*

Many partners indicated the need for services for students in the middle years, and indicated significant gaps in this age grouping. It is recommended that the district assess the adequacy of services, programs and supports for children in the middle schools. The community is exploring the establishment of a Middle Years Table and this could be a valuable resource. Should the district choose to engage in this work, staff such as the District Vice-Principal for Safe Caring and Connected Schools could be a valuable contributor.

H. *Child Care*

When feasible, assess district capacity to support the community's need around increased childcare spaces by utilizing surplus school facilities.

I. *Transportation*

Assess options to address the barriers to participation in before and after school programs that relate to bussing services in the district.

Impacts

Schools do not exist in isolation and nor should they work in isolation. Fortunately, for the Abbotsford Board of Education, they don't have to. Abbotsford schools are benefitting from the support of rich partnerships within the community. The Inventory of Partnerships provides a catalog of the supports contributed by organizations.

The often heard statement, "It takes a village to raise a child," is indicative of the feeling ones gets when interacting with schools and partners in Abbotsford. The organizations, agencies, ministries, and societies that contributed to this review see themselves as keen contributors to the student successes achieved. There were numerous examples of organizations allocating funds to provide services in schools, resources that would not be possible to allocate from a regular school district budget. There is no doubt the impact partners are having on early learning; elementary, middle and secondary school programs and student experiences; school connectedness; social and emotional development; and career development, to name just a few.

The district is poised to enter the next phase of partnership development, moving from cooperation and coordination, to an ultimate goal of collaboration and service integration. As the district moves forward, Abbotsford students will enjoy even more success.

> "Interagency collaboration is based on the premise that value is created both for the organizations and for the clients they serve when disparate organizations work together."
>
> Sally Seldon

Across sectors, collaboration and other inter-organizational structures have been consistently heralded as the way to find new solutions to complex problems.[5] With the quality partnerships that exist, the Abbotsford Board is well positioned to address the challenges that lie ahead.

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[5] Seldon et al, (2006) The Impact of Nonprofit Collaboration in Early Child Care and Education on Management and Program Outcomes, , Public Administration Review

Appendix

Inventory of Partnerships

A detailed inventory of partnerships has been prepared as a result of this review. Each school, and each family of schools have been inventoried. The following represents highlights of services and programs available.

Early Learning - A range of service providers, including Abbotsford Community Services, Hand-In-Hand, Central Abbotsford Community School Society, West Abbotsford Community School Society, Public Health, Fraser Valley Child Development, Ministry of Children and Families, and 13 Pre-school Providers.

Elementary Schools - A range of service providers, including Abbotsford Community Services, Hand-In-Hand, Central Abbotsford Community School Society, West Abbotsford Community School Society, Public Health, Fraser Valley Child Development, Ministry of Children and Families, University of the Fraser Valley, Big Brothers and Sisters, private before and after school childcare providers, Abbotsford Fire Department, Abbotsford Police Department
13 Church groups, 6 Sports/ Athletics Groups, 12 Service groups, and 19 individual business partners.

Middle Schools - A range of service providers, including Abbotsford Community Services, Central Abbotsford Community School Society, West Abbotsford Community School Society, Abbotsford Youth Commission, CYRUS Center, Public Health, Fraser Valley Child Development, a number of Fraser Health Adolescent intervention services, Ministry of Children and Families, University of the Fraser Valley, Big Brothers and Sisters, Abbotsford Fire Department, Abbotsford Police Department, IMPACT, 13 Service groups, 4 Church groups, 2 Sports/ Athletics Groups, and 3 individual business partners.

Secondary Schools - A range of service providers, including Abbotsford Community Services, CYRUS Center, Public Health, Fraser Valley Child Development, a number of Fraser Health Adolescent intervention services, Ministry of Children and Families, Big Brothers and Sisters, Abbotsford Police Department, IMPACT, YMCA, 3 Advanced Education partners, 38 Service groups, 3 Church groups, 35 Sports/ Athletics Groups, and 16 individual business partners.