

# LEADING A SCHOOL COMMUNITY THROUGH A PANDEMIC

with Dr. Jerome Cranston Ph.D

Wednesdays @ 2 pm MDT (Saskatchewan)  
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## Episode 5: Impacts & Needs of Indigenous Families & Students - April 29, 2020

In this week's episode Dr. Cranston spoke with Rina Whitford who is the Program Lead at the Indigenous Education Department of the Winnipeg School Division. Below is a summary of their conversation.

**Dr. Cranston:** What challenges already exist in the school system for Indigenous students and their families, and how are those being exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic?

**Whitford:** Within our school division we have the highest number of Indigenous students in the province and we (Indigenous Education Department) have seven indigenous graduation coaches that can provide help and already have a trusted relationship established with the students and a lot of the families. They have shifted their focus from academics to making sure the students and families are doing well, having their basic needs met, and if they even have access to the remote learning options that teachers are providing them. We already know that there is an academic achievement gap between indigenous and non-indigenous students, but the pandemic and forced remote learning is putting a magnifying glass on the gap. The question becomes "what are we grading on right now?", are we grading on academics or by privilege of what students have access to right now. I also sit on a divisional technology needs committee and these issues are popping up all over the place. We are taking inventory on students that don't have access to Wi-Fi or technology, and some of these households are not focused on education right now, but rather the basic needs and well-being of the members of the house. With the Indigenous Education team, a lot of our work is advocating for indigenous students and their families, in terms of their basic needs, mental well-being, and then equitable access to education tools.

**Dr. Cranston:** What initiatives or strategies that you or the team are working on have been showing signs of success?

**Whitford:** It's been very interesting to see what's successful at the highschool level. A lot of our indigenous highschool students go to school in Winnipeg because they don't have a highschool in their own community and they've now gone back to their home communities and are in lock-down. So now it's not only a matter of coordinating resources within our division, but now we're coordinating with other organizations, including the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC) to see who can connect with the students in various communities. Our indigenous graduation coaches are actually having the highest connection rate with students and their families via social media. They are now on all platforms, because it is the easiest and most efficient way to connect with all of their students since that's what the students are familiar with. With early years students we are finding success with community support workers engaging in sidewalk conversations with families while they are bringing them food hampers and wellness packages. Our indigenous literacy intervention support teachers are making those deliveries and taking advantage of the opportunity to have the face to face contact with the students (while maintaining social distance of course). They are able to bring or pick up educational materials, but more importantly they are bringing books and doing inventory checks of the households to see what the family has access to and what they might need. The biggest thing is really to decide what is going to be most meaningful for these families to engage in at this time. It's probably not worksheets, but most likely other types of learning.

**Dr. Cranston:** As we transition to whatever school looks like when we come back from this pandemic, what are some of the things educators need to do when they welcome back indigenous students?

**Whitford:** Teachers are already challenged with the diverse needs of their students so the results of this pandemic will probably just widen that gap even more. Some students will come back in September without having missed a beat, while others won't have engaged in any remote learning at all. My biggest concern is how are marginalized and devalued groups welcomed back when there is an even bigger academic achievement gap than what they left with. It puts pressure on teachers because students can feel if they are a burden and could be quick to tune the teacher out. I worry about that sense of belonging after this isolation period. Privilege plays such a large role in the outcome of what things look like in the classroom when we go back to school. The academic achievement gap is always such a big topic and I fear that our students are going to be viewed as even more as "less-thans" upon returning and teachers will need to be prepared for that.

**Dr. Cranston:** On a personal note, because I think incredibly highly of you and you are always in such a great state of mind, where are you finding your own strength and resiliency?

**Whitford:** Everything's happening so fast and days are flying by. I'm finding I'm in a good routine working from home now and maintaining that routine is how I've been able to stay sane. There's the odd afternoon where I need an energy drink to get me through the rest of the day but I think it all comes down to routine. I appreciate my early mornings when I'm able to knock out a couple hours of work before the kids wake up and it's time to teach them. I've been trying

to take my own advice that I'm sharing with others, in not worrying about falling behind and juggling all the responsibilities. It's ok if you don't get to the assignment or if at the end of the work day the house is messy and I haven't cooked a five-star dinner because I have lots of things to be appreciative for, even if things get chaotic. I get to spend a lot of time with my kids even if I'm not personally engaged with them every minute, all of that time is a gift. The three things I've been relying on most are balance, routine, and being part of a division that is striving for equitable access to education. Some of the biggest things that drive me everyday are things like collaborating with organizations trying to access iPads with wi-fi and making sure as many families as possible have access to these things that they need to continue to allow education to exist in their lives.

**Dr. Cranston:** Thanks for bringing such a dose of reality and optimism Rina. I really appreciate all the things you do and for making the time to come on and talk to me and this web series, and I look forward to the work we will do together in the future.