

CASE STUDY | Portage La Prairie: Roving Campus Re-Engages Students

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OVERVIEW

Portage La Prairie's Roving Campus is a new innovative initiative created by three local teachers with the support from the Portage La Prairie School Division. Launched in 2020, the Roving Campus operates five days a week. Three days are dedicated to the teaching of essential outcomes and certifications. Two days are reserved for planning, coaching, and one-on-one instruction. In the first year the campus operated with 22 full-time students.

The mission of the campus is to make learning engaging and relevant to students. All of the students selected for the Roving Campus had been identified as "non-attenders" and were admitted to the program with the support of an advocate. In order to close the gaps that are experienced by many, each student accepted into the program is given access to transportation, lunch, a laptop, and Internet access as part of the program. The Roving Campus has three goals for its students:

1. Improved attendance (*indicated through attendance rates*)
2. Development of citizenship skills (*indicated through certifications*); and,
3. Graduation from high school (*indicated through credit achievement*)

Every day is a new experience for students who don't know where their "classroom" – which consists of the entire community – will be from week-to-week. Learning activities include hands-on and experiential learning while covering a variety of high school courses. Students leave the Roving Campus program with a high school diploma, employability skills, and specific training certifications and targeted supports.

About the Roving Campus

The Roving Campus – Portage La Prairie's Roving Campus provides an alternate learning experience for up to 30 young people not succeeding in the traditional high school environment with an alternate pathway to a high-school diploma, employability skills and other trainings and certification.

The Roving Campus considers the entire community as its "classroom" and moves its location from week to week. Students spend the majority of time outside the "classroom" and are offered different hands-on and experiential learning opportunities that cover an array of high school courses.

The Roving Campus provides students with transportation, lunch, a laptop and internet access thereby closing gaps experienced by its participants.

The greatest success of the Roving Campus is that it offers students who were once at risk of not completing high-school, the engagement and support they need to chart a path to a brighter future.

DESIGNING A UNIQUE CURRICULUM

The idea for the Roving Campus emerged from a sense of collective frustration. The number of students failing to graduate within the community was consistently higher than the provincial average. The teachers who championed the Roving Campus idea knew that the students who weren't succeeding in the mainstream school system, and would likely benefit from the best possible teaching, often ended up working alone with a pencil and a packet of papers.

The proposal for the Roving Campus – and its innovative idea to redefine the notion of "classroom" – was accepted by the School Division as a pilot project for the Community Innovation Fund through Communities Building Youth Futures in Summer 2020.

The Roving Campus curriculum has included a bio-blitz on Crescent Lake, interviews with Indigenous elders at the former residential school, and an "Amazing Race" style event at the riparian forest to provide a few examples.

The teacher champions chose to adopt [Wlodkowski's Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching](#) to guide the curriculum development for the Roving Campus. Knowing that the Roving Campus aims to be an "outside the box" innovative pilot, the use of validated frameworks helps to ensure the Roving Campus design is one that is ultimately sustainable – and shareable – with other schools and communities. The curriculum team is also considering a variety of ways to collect data and develop templates that can be easily used and adapted by other communities.

A consistent element in the design of the curriculum has been drawing on educators' knowledge of student engagement to improve student satisfaction of their Roving Campus experience. Veteran educators designing the Roving Campus pilot, speak with students daily to identify their knowledge gaps and continue to refine the program's curriculum. Common themes from conversations with students reveal that many have found their previous school experiences to not be challenging and/or course content to be repetitive and "boring." This commentary is especially true for students participating in self-directed learning (SDL) courses. SDL courses are often promoted to students who have difficulty functioning in "regular" classrooms. Student feedback about frustration with past learning experiences inspired the teachers at the Roving Campus to want to offer something that is substantially different from "business as usual." At the same time, they maintained an unwavering focus on the program's overall goal of supporting high school graduation, given evidence that clearly shows how high school graduation improves a person's lifelong employment opportunities as well as their overall rates of general life satisfaction.

The Roving Campus Overcoming Student Barriers by Design	
<i>Student Barrier</i>	<i>Student Barrier Addressed</i>
• Students don't have reliable transportation to school	• Roving Campus purchased a van
• Students don't have regular meals	• Roving Campus program includes meals
• Students lack gym clothes	• Roving Campus provided gym clothes
• Students experience judgement & racism	• Roving Campus has been designed as a safe space
• Students lack educational advocacy & planning	• Roving Campus works with students to create graduation plans
• Students lack resume skills	• Roving Campus curriculum provides resume skills and certifications
• Students lack identification documents	• Roving Campus assists students to obtain identity documents

One of the best teaching strategies developed by the teacher champions at the Roving Campus has been identifying [35 essential outcomes](#) for their courses. These outcomes are posted on the wall to support staff team to anchor their planning and focus the students. The 35 essential outcomes have resulted in “the development of a lot of useful strategies to engage non-attending high school students.”

Students who have been encouraged to join the Roving Campus pilot were those typically labeled as “at risk” of not graduating. The Roving Campus curriculum team began designing their program recognizing that the typical high school experience has clearly not worked for these students. In designing the Roving Campus curriculum, the teacher champions were committed to demonstrating that the unique approach used for this pilot WOULD work. Another important aspect of the design of the Roving Campus is that the voices of students are documented throughout the project so that the project’s design and curriculum can evolve based on the specific needs of the learners.

THE ROVING CAMPUS STAFF TEAM

The Portage la Prairie School Division has provided three staff to the Roving Campus pilot in its start-up year, given the dual focus on teaching AND adapting the overall project design and curriculum. It is anticipated that the total size of the project’s teaching staff will be reduced in subsequent years as the design demands associated with the program decline.

Two youth leaders have also been hired as part of the Roving Campus staff team. The first youth leader is a student teacher from a local university. The second youth leader has been hired as an educational assistant and has experience and background similar to the students who participate in the Roving Campus.

EARLY IMPACTS AND INSIGHTS

As an initiative of the Portage La Prairie School Division, the Roving Campus is required to provide academic documentation to the provincial government. In addition, the Roving Campus project team is committed to documenting and sharing its experiences so that this model can hopefully be shared and possibly adapted for use in other schools and communities.

A primary indicator of success for the Roving Campus is the number of students retained in the program. The Roving Campus uses a variety of strategies to encourage attendance, but *engagement with lessons* is the primary one.

“Our team would say that we have never worked harder or been more challenged. We would also say that we have never learned as much or been more inspired. We can’t recall experiencing more success in such a short period of time than with the Roving Campus pilot.”

Reflections on Student Retention and Attendance

Reflections by the Roving Campus staff team on their progress in addressing student retention and attendance offer the following highlights summarized below:

Successes

- Most students showed improved attendance
- All students are now on-track to graduate in 2021 or have a viable plan to graduate as mature students
- The curriculum has offered a variety of rich learning experiences of local interest

Challenges

- COVID-19 has limited movement outside the school and made it difficult to engage in group work and team building exercises that were part of the curriculum
- COVID-19 has impacted attendance

Barriers

- A fundamental principle in the design of the Roving Campus has been to identify and address barriers for students. To date, the team has not yet encountered any barriers that could not be addressed
- Roving Campus students often cope with tragedy. The deaths of two local young men had a major impact on several students

Insights

- Attendance at the Roving Campus has remained relatively constant despite not being able to fully engage in activities that were planned pre COVID-19 lockdown & restrictions
- Personal transportation to school and the provision of meals are useful in improving attendance
- Certification programs are popular because they provide tangible successes for students on a shorter timeline than typical school courses

Reflections on Student Success and Graduation

A secondary indicator of success for the Roving Campus is the total number of students who will graduate from high school and how they manage as graduates. In fact, the staff team is interested in tracking students past the time they spend in the Roving Campus in order to better understand both the immediate and longer-term impacts of the initiative.

Roving Campus by the Numbers

(as of November 19th, 2020)

In its first two months in operation, the Roving Campus offered the following data snapshot about the program and its 20 students.

Roving Campus Student Profile

- 15 students (75%) are attending the program regularly
- 18 students (90%) are 17 years-old and two are adults over 18 years-old
- 18 students (90%) are Indigenous or Métis

Roving Campus Project Data

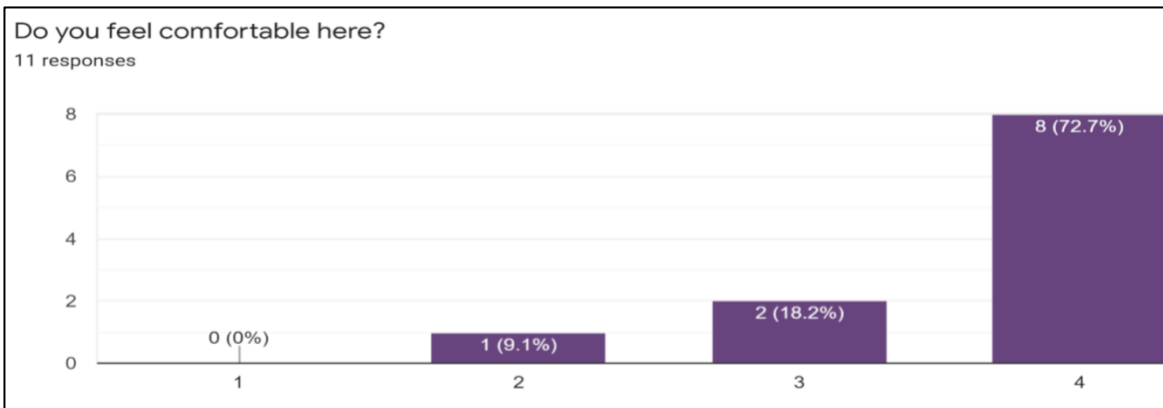
- 22 000 - Steps taken on first day of class
- 600 - kilometers driving students to school
- 400 - meals provided
- 40 - certification programs started
- 35 - provincial essential standards developed
- 15 - credits taught concurrently
- 11 - local businesses supported
- 10 - guest speakers featured
- 9 - student-specific learning plans created
- 4 - students planning to attend post-secondary schools
- 0 - number of student suspensions

None of the students who are now attending the Roving Campus were on track to graduate prior to joining the program. However as illustrated below, the progress of Roving Campus students is significant:

- All 20 Roving Campus students are presently working on achieving certifications that will be added to their resumes
- 5 students (25%) have expressed an interest in post-secondary programs in graphic arts, culinary arts, agriculture, nursing, and communications.
- The 5 students interested in exploring post-secondary education are now being assisted to achieve their required credits as well as receiving support from the staff team on other issues related to this goal, including: support with the post-secondary application process; funding options and budgeting
- Seven students (35%) who potentially qualify for the Secured Certificate of Indian Status have now been able to be registered in-house thanks to the support of a community partner: Portage La Prairie Community Revitalization Corporation (PCRC)

IN THEIR OWN WORDS | STUDENT FEEDBACK ON THE ROVING CAMPUS

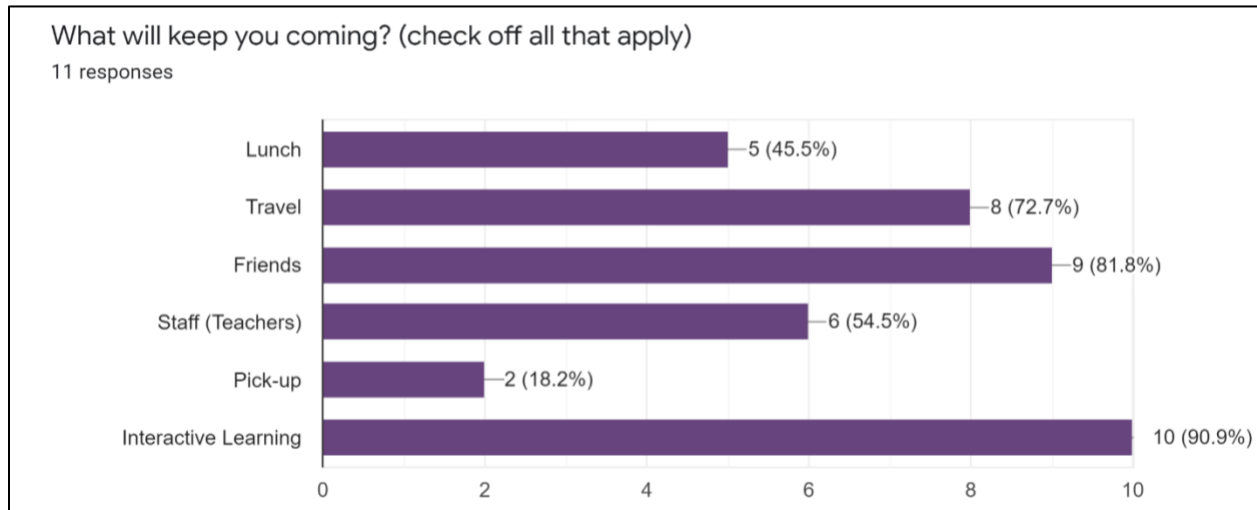
Meaningfully and frequently engaging input from their students is a principle and practice that is embedded in how the Roving Campus operates. This input also offers some powerful insights and feedback from Roving Campus students about their experience as collected up to April 1st, 2021.



When asked whether or not their school attendance has improved and why, students offered the following responses:

- Better than last year I hope cause last year I skipped lots!
- Yes. The times I'm not here is because I'm sick.
- Yeah. Its more enjoyable to be here than normal school.
- I think so.
- Yes, but it's still not as good as I want it to be because I'm sick.
- No.
- Yes, because I actually enjoy attending.
- Yes, because I want to graduate.
- Not recently.
- I'd say so.
- From last year? I went to no classes. I'm actually showing up.

Students were also asked to rate the various elements of the Roving Campus design that supported them in continuing to attend. Their responses, listed below, offer rich insights into the value of the program's overall design.



When asked about **the best thing** they'd experienced in the Roving Campus and why, students offered a broad range of responses which certainly highlight how unique each student's experience with the program has been. Some of the best things identified by students include:

- The Forks trip.
- When we went fishing.
- Rock climbing and the class in general.
- Don't know.
- Going to the forks because it was nice to go for a nice long walk around Winnipeg.
- Trip to Fort Garry.
- Working in the archive because I enjoy looking at the old pictures and items.
- Everything.
- Trying new things.
- Portage hidden facts.
- Gym at Southport because it is my favorite gym.

Students were also asked to share specific details about **the worst thing** they had experienced in the Roving Campus program and why. Student responses are listed below:

- Nothing yet.
- Nothing
- Not having enough gym days.
- Haven't had a bad experience yet.
- Sitting at the island all day!
- The culture shock of the large amount of walking on day 1.
- Nothing.
- Some of the lunches made me sick.
- Death of a close friend not connected but did put me back... time wise.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

One of the most powerful – and sustainable – features of the design for the Roving Campus...and its view of the entire community as its “classroom” is the participation and partnerships it has fostered with a diverse list of community partners throughout Portage La Prairie and Manitoba. This list of partners and their contributions to the success of the Roving Campus is also a beautiful illustration of the old adage “it takes a village to raise a child.” Below is a short list of some of the organizations that have contributed to the curriculum for the Roving Campus:



Roving Campus Students on a Community Tour

- **Central Plains Recreational Complex** – This facility allowed access to all services, including rock climbing, at a discount.
- **Indigenous Services Canada** – When the program could no longer use private vehicles to transport students due to the COVID-19 lockdown, PCRC successfully applied for a grant to purchase a used Toyota Sienna van at a cost of over \$20 000.
- **Keeshkeemaquah Urban Reserve** – This partner let the Roving Campus use the former residential school as a classroom and then use their bingo hall for lunch that day. As well, they allowed the program to use their property to host a welcoming tobacco ceremony for the students.
- **Keystone Sports** – Students didn’t have appropriate shoes for physical education and were operating with a tight budget. When they learned about this, this local business pulled dozens of shoes out of stock that they agreed to discount for the program. When they went shopping, each student chose a brand-new pair of shoes. Some students had never had a shopping experience like this where they could “buy whatever they liked” and were thrilled to not have to settle for buying seconds or accepting leftovers. After this experience, a couple of students revealed that they really valued the opportunity to try things on without feeling awkward since when they’re alone, they are often followed.
- **Leader of the Official Opposition, Manitoba** – Wab Kinew was able to make time to speak to students about Louis Riel when Roving Campus went to the Legislature. 90% of students are Indigenous or Métis so Wab was able to make connections with them that other political leaders may not have been able to.

- **Portage la Prairie City Hall** – The mayor loaned the entire second floor of city hall to the Roving Campus to use as a classroom and provided students with soft drinks during their tour. He also spent time working with students on their presentations to city council.
- **Portage Golf Course** – The golf course provided discounted green fees to Roving Campus students.
- **Portage la Prairie School Division** – The school division has worked closely with the Roving Campus. Beyond working with the staff team to clear hurdles in educational matters such as reporting, and providing material and professional assistance, the division allowed the program to use its electrostatic disinfection sprayer to prepare the Toyota van for use and provided training on how to operate it. They also allowed the program to park its van in the Portage Collegiate Institute’s heated garage.
- **Portage Supermarket** – In September, the supermarket provided food to the Roving Campus students. This included packing meals at a discount and providing a special menu of World War I inspired food for the student’s day at Camp Hughes.
- **Prairie Cinema Centre** – This local theatre provided use of its theatre at a discounted rate a “classroom” and supplied students with popcorn, candy, and drinks.
- **Stride Place** – This multi-purpose arena and recreational centre provided the Campus with a discounted room rental for a Forced to Flee refugee simulation.



Roving Campus Dakota Tipi Class

CONCLUSION

This innovative new initiative in Portage La Prairie powerfully demonstrates that young people – particularly those who have struggled in traditional school settings – can thrive in innovative programs which emphasize student engagement and wrap-around supports as much as learning. It also demonstrates that with consistent supports, young people are willing and able to make long-term plans and chart pathways towards great futures. Not only is the Roving Campus doing an excellent job in teaching its students, over time this program also promises to teach us all new lessons and insights about how to engage and support young people to thrive.

The word "Canada" in a serif font, with a small Canadian flag icon above the letter 'a'.

Initial funding for the Roving Campus was provided as a Community Innovation Fund grant provided to [Portage la Prairie Community Building Youth Futures](#). The aim of [Community Innovation Fund](#) grants is to pilot and scale innovative projects to support better outcomes for youth.

[Communities Building Youth Futures](#) (CBYF) is a five-year, pan-Canadian project to develop Collective Impact, system-wide solutions for youth as they build and act upon plans for their future. CBYF is funded by the [Government of Canada's Goal Getters Program](#) and delivered by the [Tamarack Institute](#).

The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada