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Maggie Macintosh, the new WFP education reporter, has just produced the single most flattering portrait of public school teachers in the K-12 system that I've ever read. A huge project with a short timeline, this piece shows the hard work, joy and human face of teachers. The photos by Freep photographer Ruth Bonneville are a dream. Ahuge boost as we head into the next three weeks.

Link is here: <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/education-special-568917622.html>

# Learning swerve

**The Free Press travels from kindergarten to Grade 12 with passionate educators who find innovative, inclusive ways to deliver Manitoba's public-school curriculum so it matters to an increasingly diverse student population**

**Local Journalism Initiative Reporter** By: [Maggie Macintosh](#) | Posted: 03/20/2020 7:00 PM | [Comments: 1](#) | Last Modified: 03/20/2020 8:09 PM | [Updates](#)

Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen calls the education system "a zero-sum game."

Students are the players. Teachers provide instruction and tips. Communities are the support system.

Together, the objective is to equip the next generation with numeracy and literacy skills, critical-thinking abilities and the emotional intelligence required after the final school bell rings.

Goertzen tells the Free Press the biggest challenge is that there is only so much time — between kindergarten and graduation — to do just that.

It's a balancing act of in-classroom lessons and assemblies and events, he says, adding the latter can be positive, but he believes there's been declining focus on curriculum.

"A lot of teachers are telling me they're having a hard time getting through the curriculum," he says.



THE CANADIAN PRESS/ANDREW VAUGHAN

School administration consultant Avis Glaze.

In January 2019, the provincial government appointed a nine-member commission — including former Progressive Conservative education minister Clayton Manness — to undertake a review of the kindergarten-to-Grade 12 education system in Manitoba.

The team's lead consultant was Avis Glaze, an education adviser who authored a controversial report for the Nova Scotia government that recommended sweeping changes, including replacing elected school boards with an advisory council.

Goertzen cited the last review being at least a half-century ago and Manitoba's slipping standardized test scores as reason for examining education.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's latest international student assessment scores show Canadian

students are strong in numeracy and literacy, but Manitoba's statistics are at the back of the pack. The province came in last place in math and science; it was second-to-last in reading. Critics have pointed out that the testing isn't specific to Manitoba's curriculum.

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Government briefing notes obtained by the Free Press through a freedom of information request indicate the commissioners received upwards of 10,000 online survey responses and nearly 2,300 written submissions. They also undertook school visits and held interactive workshops, public hearings and in-person meetings with school officials and organizations.

The only things the commissioners didn't look at were the education funding model, teacher salaries and pensions, and the province's French-language division.



MIKAELA MACKENZIE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Manitoba Minister of education Kelvin Goertzen.

The government received the report last month, ahead of the first confirmed COVID-19 case in Manitoba. It was expected to be made public before the end of March, but Goertzen took to Twitter this week to announce it will be put on hold while the province focuses on the health of Manitobans.

He promised the province will not act on legislative changes recommended in the report until summer 2021, at the earliest.

In the days leading up to the announcement and impending school closures, the Free Press visited a classroom in each K-12 level to take the pulse of the public education system at present. Students, parents and teachers of core subjects, Indigenous education and phys-ed shared their thoughts on what it looks like, ahead of the report.

All but two of the English divisions within the city's limits agreed to let the Free Press visit. The River-East Transcona School Division declined to participate. And although one Winnipeg School Division teacher invited a reporter into their classroom, the province's largest division refused to allow the Free Press into any of its facilities for this project.

Outside the city, Hanover and Red River Valley school divisions refused to participate. All of the rejections were made clear at least one week prior to COVID-19 being diagnosed in Manitoba.

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From an elementary school in Lorette to a middle-years school in southwest Winnipeg to a high school in Portage la Prairie, educators and students express many of the same values. The importance of small class sizes, creating safe spaces and support staff to meet "diverse needs" are common themes.

Popular buzzwords and phrases include "inquiry," "project-based learning," "student voice and choice" and "math talk."

"We need to make sure that we don't run to the latest fad of the day, whether that's in education or anything," Goertzen says.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Some students think public education could improve with tighter caps on class sizes.

He adds that diverse, evolving needs aren't being addressed just by teachers. Police, health-care workers and employees in other sectors are seeing their job descriptions expand, he says, adding there is a growing expectation that "the government will take on challenges that could be met at home."

"We have to do a better job of realizing that education can't be everything, but we want to make sure that it is — at its core — ensuring that young people are prepared to go onto whatever is next," he says.

Curiously, although he received — and has, presumably, read — the report last month, Goertzen said he would be "shocked" if the commissioners didn't put forward recommendations relating to poverty.

During class visits, teachers speak about the value of breakfast programs, the updated English language arts curriculum, regular curriculum reviews, goals beyond good grades, and mental health and Indigenous education.

"It's important to look at structures, practices, policies of schools to see who's being heard and reflected," says Bobbie-Jo Leclair, an Indigenous education consultant with the Louis Riel School Division.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Manitoba Education Minister Kelvin Goertzen: "Our students are as capable as any students in Canada."

Leclair says she's seen divisions slowly adopt First Nations education ideologies during her 17 years as an educator. She wants to see more land-based learning, Indigenous-language programming, division elders and overall, an in-depth understanding of Indigenous histories.

Student Kylee Rector says she thinks public education could improve with tighter caps on class sizes.

"My science this semester has 36 (students)... It's hard to learn because the classes are loud, the teacher has to focus on everybody," says Rector, a Grade 10 immersion student at Sturgeon Heights Collegiate.

Across the city, in the Seven Oaks School Division, parent Kamlesh Sharma says she wants to see more math, standardized testing and school rankings.

The report may very well address these concerns, but Goertzen is tight-lipped about the contents. He hints at the importance of informing parents about how their kids are doing, whether that's through standardized tests or otherwise. Also, he says he's "not sure" the current school governance model works because there's an experience gap between trustees and superintendents.

As for what's working, Goertzen says he's confident there are talented teachers in Manitoba and he has no doubt they'll be up for what's next.

"Our students are as capable as any students in Canada," the minister says. "There's no reason why we can't continue to make improvements."





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Sansome kindergarten teacher, Johanna Gerelus, reading and engaging her young students through play.

## Kindergarten

Cats, cleanup time and the month of March have at least one thing in common.

Johanna Gerelus has a catchy song for each subject — and there are many more where those came from, some of which also have accompanying dance routines.

"You want them to love school, more than anything. They've got many years left of school, so that's a big part of our job," Gerelus says during a quick recess break squeezed into her fast-paced morning kindergarten class at Sansome School in Westwood.



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Gerelus's focus for her students is on hands on play.

For Gerelus, that means running a classroom choir of sorts, and leading hands-on activities about letters, sounds and basic counting.

In kindergarten, students get a glimpse into what will consume their daily life for the next 13 years. Teachers are tasked with preparing them for what's next, and they often do so by introducing routine with creative lessons and colouring.

"We don't do much paper and pencil because it's not developmentally appropriate for kindergarten to sit and do worksheets and it's not the way that kids learn best," Gerelus said.

Her classroom is a fully stocked art studio: pipe cleaners, buttons and everything else that can be found in a dollar-store craft aisle are stored in primary-coloured boxes and bins.

On this particular morning, her students can be found cutting and gluing construction paper to create rainbows, building leprechaun traps with cups and Popsicle sticks and digging for treasure: letters hidden in a box of confetti.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Johanna Gerelus on her Sansome kindergarten students: "You want them to love school, more than anything."

When one student pinches a finger in a pair of scissors, Gerelus calms her down with a hug. Kindergarten, she later says, is as much about teaching students how to manage their emotions as it is about content.

On the other side of town, at École Provencher, Monique Paul is doing the same, but in a full-day kindergarten class. While parents can choose to enrol their students in either half-day or full-day programs, Paul is an advocate for the latter.

"Their comprehension, their expression, their comfort level, the social aspect — it all develops way faster with a full-day kindergarten," she says, adding she would love to see it become universal, provincially. "It gives them a heavy-duty start."

Educational assistants, occupational therapists and speech pathologists are hugely helpful in preparing five and six year olds for the daunting world of Grade 1, Paul said.

Kindergarten parent Sabrina McClellan Crawford says her son is getting a grasp on concepts such as counting, thanks to a mix of interactive lessons using a Smart Board, singing and dancing, and a flower-shop stand with a toy cash register.

She gets real-time updates as the teacher posts photos on Instagram. Increasingly, educators — Gerelus included — are using social



media to keep parents in the know.

"It's cool to get a peek inside the classroom," says McClellan Crawford, whose son attends Linwood School.



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Janette Weiss (left) and Aubrie Wertepny work at the Wonder Wall in Kelly McLure's grade 1 class at Dawson Trail School.

## Grade 1

"Why do we have boogers?"

In lopsided lettering, the question is posted on Kelly McLure's Wonder Wall in her Grade 1 classroom.

At least one of her students is curious about the existence of the ever-enticing mucus caught in their tiny nose hairs. It makes McLure laugh, but in all seriousness, it will guide her lessons on the five senses: smell, sight, sound, touch and taste.

In Grade 1, students start to learn about independence as they begin to transition from play-based, exploratory learning to an inquiry approach. They use words, pictures and their own experiences to understand lessons and ask questions. Their curiosity could be focused on addition and subtraction techniques, or why certain animals hibernate in the winter. Or boogers.





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Kelly McLure's emphasis on inquiry-based learning reflects an increasingly-popular trend in the province's classrooms - teachers creating lessons centered around student-driven ideas and questions.

Teachers in all levels are increasingly developing lesson plans around an inquiry-based model to prioritize student curiosity alongside the curriculum. A teacher of 20 years, McLure says her classroom looks a lot different today than it did in the early 2000s.

"It was more teacher-led, and now it's more student-led. That's what the inquiry does; kids are doing the wondering and we're helping guide them to answers," she says, sitting in her lamp-lit, plant-filled classroom in Lorette.

Room 21 at Dawson Trail School is built from scratch every school year, by and for students. In teaching them about responsibility, McLure wants her Grade 1s to feel ownership over their classroom. From the labels on their class library to the questions written on the Wonder Wall, everything is in student script.

"My goal for them is to be as independent as possible in their learning. The whole year is the gradual release of responsibility; it's me showing them and eventually, them becoming their own learner," she says.



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Brodric McDonnell uses a magnifying glass at the wonder table with classmates. Mrs. McLure's class is learning about the five senses by asking questions and posting them on one of the Wonder Wall boards.

On a recent afternoon, a math lesson in Room 21 is a textbook example. As the students return from the library in a herd, they quietly follow earlier directions to form groups to take turns counting colourful building blocks, tallying the number of animals on various cue cards and answering addition problems in their booklets.

School, however, isn't only about reading, writing and arithmetic anymore, McLure says.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

McLure's Grade 1 students learn arithmetic by using building blocks and cue cards.

"There's kids who are coming to school these days with very diverse needs and if we want them to grow up to be successful members of society, we have to give them the tools."

For McLure, that means more professional development focused on how to teach students who have lived through trauma of any sort.

Charlene Sacher, who has three girls, in Grades 1, 4 and 6, applauds how educators are using alternative methods to cater to different students' needs.

Sacher says that while math scores in Manitoba don't match those of other provinces, she believes the barrier to achieving higher scores across the board isn't in the curriculum, but the community.

"The bigger barrier... is the poverty level, and not addressing a lot of that social-emotional and social-economic disparity within different schools and different areas within our community," she says.

## Grade 2

Kylie Pantel has 18 sous-chefs.

At Glenwood School, the class of grades 1 and 2 students can often be found in the kitchen. Recent recipes include homemade fruit rollups, fruit pizzas and veggie tots.

While tasty, the snacks also serve as part of a larger spread — a series of projects during which students are indirectly learning skills, including procedural writing, measurements and charting, as well as what's inside Canada's Food Guide.

"With project-based learning, the project at the end becomes your whole teaching, so it's not the dessert teaching, it's the main-course teaching. Your focus is on that project and all the learning and all those outcomes, they just tie in to what your whole general project is," Pantel says moments after the end-of-day bell rings.



Glenwood School Grades 1 and 2 teacher Kylie Pantel.

In Grade 2, students continue to master simple math and literacy objectives; it's at this level when they typically start to read and view books and other materials on their own. Key content includes lessons on graphing, fundamentals of motion and how to live active and healthy lifestyles.

In order to coach classes at Glenwood School, Pantel and her colleagues are piloting a year focused on projects.

During project time, the Grade 1-2 students can be found preparing meals, painting still life or charting food groups represented in the school's snack program; it turns out grains and proteins are overrepresented compared to vegetables and fruits, and Pantel's class wants to change that.

They'll soon start to research kid-friendly recipes online and in cookbooks to create their own snacks and record recipes in groups.

Project-based learning — currently generating a fair bit of buzz in Manitoba education circles — is defined as a holistic, student-centred approach to learning through exploring real-world challenges. Proponents such as Pantel argue it leads to deeper learning because, much like inquiry, students guide projects based on their interests.

*"With project-based learning, the project at the end becomes your whole teaching, so it's not the dessert teaching, it's the main-course teaching. Your focus is on that project and all the learning and all those outcomes, they just tie in to what your whole general project is."* — Kylie Pantel

A pair of Grade 2 parents who hail from opposite ends of the city, André Vautour and Sofia Soriano are strangers who share views on new strategies in teaching core subjects, such as math.

"The change away from just memorizing facts and more towards number sense has been pretty effective for my son," says Vautour, whose son is in the Pembina Trails School Division.

At all levels, teachers across the province are leading "math talk" — sessions in which students are given a problem and time alone to brainstorm. They are then asked to share their method with classmates to further decode their own process and learn from others' thinking.

Soriano says her daughter, who is in the Winnipeg School Division, has also found success at school thanks to the Spanish bilingual program. "It is important with us that Maya will feel represented in the place where she studies — that will have a great effect on the self-esteem and image of children who have different roots," she says.



Early childhood is the best time to learn a language, Soriano adds. "We underestimate children for what they can learn."

## Grade 3

Forget an apple on her desk.

Amanda Karpinsky is far more concerned about whether her students have a healthy breakfast.

Riverbend Community School runs a daily breakfast program for all of its K-5 students enrolled in either the English or Ojibwa bilingual program.

"It's just a piece of bread with a little bit of jam on it because we don't have the money for more than that, but it's something — and it's so important," says Karpinsky, a Grades 3 and 4 teacher at the north Winnipeg school.



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Amanda Karpinsky, a Grades 3 and 4 teacher at Riverbend Community School.

"Those social supports need to be there in order for a public school system to function, because if your needs aren't being met, then it's really difficult to learn."

In her own classroom, Karpinsky is frank about the inequities that exist in the world.

Handwriting on a torn-out piece of chart paper hung on one of the walls defines poverty as a word with many meanings: being unable to afford enough food, clothing or shelter; not being able to go to school; feeling unsafe or excluded.

In Grade 3, students across the province begin to learn about human rights, what's happening in the world around them and the diversity of natural landscapes, societies and cultures on the planet. At the same time, they are discovering they can be change-makers.

In autumn, Karpinsky's class marched along Broadway to demand climate action, alongside seasoned scientists and environmentalists.

A brainstorm cloud of problems they want to solve — on the wall next to the poverty definition — includes global warming and pollution.

"What is unique about Grade 3s is that they are approaching that next phase of their life where they can really take lead on the things that really matter to them, but they're still developing those coping mechanisms and how do we navigate the world, and how do we deal with those big feelings," Karpinsky says.

*"It's just a piece of bread with a little bit of jam on it because we don't have the money for more than that, but it's something - and it's so important."* — Amanda Karpinsky on Riverbend Community School's breakfast program

Grade 3 students are limited in the ways they can actively participate in the communities they live in, so Manitoba teachers have to get creative, as one in Seven Oaks School Division did last fall.

At the same time that her students' adult family members were headed to polling stations to cast ballots in provincial and federal elections, the democratic process was alive in the classroom, as well.

Students voted for their favourite cartoon characters.

"In a very innovative way, she told the kids how elections work, what are elections and how to make good choices," says Kamlesh



Sharma, whose daughter entered the world of politics in that classroom.

"It's a very good way to teach the kids."



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Garrett Young, a Grade 4 and 5 teacher at Linwood School.

## Grade 4

One seat doesn't fit all.

That's Garrett Young's teaching philosophy.

It's also the physical reality in his second-floor classroom at Linwood School.

In Room 15, among the hard plastic chairs of the stock-photo variety, there are rocking chairs and wobble stools that accompany students' wooden desks. The alternative seats are super-sized fidget spinners.

"It's just all about what your students need. I have 24 students, so it can be 24 completely different personalities that need 24 different things, six or seven times a day," says Young, who teaches grades 4 and 5, while a stampede of students switch classes.

"You're constantly re-evaluating what you need to do."

In Grade 4, students have a solid understanding of elementary literacy and numeracy, the structure of lessons and expectations of their behaviour at school.



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Young on his Grade 4 and 5 Linwood School students' needs: "You're constantly re-evaluating what you need to do."

The curriculum expands on students' knowledge of subjects ranging from multiplication to animals. There's also an emphasis on research and sources — people, libraries, maps and so on.

Young's plan for this particular afternoon lesson is to teach sound with plastic cups, tape and a roll of string. The energetic students pair up and adjust their string's length and tightness to figure out the most effective way to communicate via homemade telephone.

After several adjustments, the girl in a rainbow unicorn print dress asks her classmate, "OK, can you hear me now?" The partners grin and give each other a thumb's up before alerting Young of their discovery.

"When you have that relationship and trust with kids, you can get a lot more from them in terms of what they're willing to learn," he says after the lesson.

He builds relationships with students during regular class time and Linwood Leaders programming. Young co-created the group to help empower students through recycling initiatives and community-building challenges.

In the southwest corner of the city, Crystal Webster has met many teachers over the years as her four boys — who are currently in grades 1, 4, 6 and 9 — make their way through Manitoba's public education system.

In recent years, Webster says she's noticed more and more adaptation in schools, whether it be adjusting teaching styles or the height of desks.

"No longer is there the uniform one desk, one chair in a row. Now it's a little bit more conducive to group-style settings, which I think is good and bad," she says, adding her Grade 4 son, at South Pointe School, is a chatterbox, so he enjoys working in group desk arrangements, but has trouble concentrating in them.

## Grade 5

As they plan their dream vacations, the last thing Chris Heidebrecht's grades 5 and 6 students are worried about is the novel coronavirus.

The 10, 11 and 12 year olds are eager to plan trips to sandy beaches and amusement parks.

Minor logistical details just keep getting in the way: they don't quite meet the age requirements for booking hotels — and it's a class assignment.



Minnetonka School teacher Chris Heidebrecht on his Grade 5 and 6 students: "We talk a lot about asking questions and finding answers in our classroom. It's about the process."

In Grade 5, students learn how to read news stories, analyze weather reports and study the earliest forms of travel: exploration, settlement and colonization. Also in the curriculum is the study of solids, liquids and gases in science. Math includes shapes, estimation and probability.

A teacher at Minnetonka School, Heidebrecht likes to blend subjects as he teaches his students both content and critical life skills in Room 3.

"To me, the most powerful learning is when we're connecting all of these different subject areas in a project that students are interested in and engaged in, and collaborating, working together on," he says over the lunch hour.

Before sitting down to talk about school, Heidebrecht circles his class to help students with a project slot, during which some are finalizing their vacation-planning projects. The assignment not only requires that they find their desired destination on a map, but also read forecasts and calculate plane-ticket costs.

One student boasts about his trip to Walt Disney World, which is going to cost him upwards of \$30,000, since he has chosen to fly business class and spend his non-theme park hours in luxury accommodations. Another student, also planning a vacation to Orlando, is scheduling a visit during off-season, citing cost and shorter lines.

"We talk a lot about asking questions and finding answers in our classroom. It's about the process and that process can be reapplied when they go to high school, when they go to university, when they have a job or even something as simple as fixing a headlight on a Mazda," Heidebrecht says.

Durdana Islam, a Winnipeg parent whose kids are in grades 5 and 10, says she's noticed how invested her youngest is in his work when he's passionate about a task. Oftentimes, it's a craft or an experiment that is math-, science- or visual arts-related.



"The best thing, so far, was when they made slime. He was super-excited because he had to know exactly how much to measure," Islam says.

Islam says her son was nervous last fall because they had moved to a new southwest neighbourhood in the Pembina Trails School Division, and she, a single parent, was concerned that he might not have a robust support system to ensure he felt comfortable in the new school.

The following weeks were filled with email exchanges with a teacher, meetings with a principal and conversations with a guidance counsellor.

"We worked as a team," she says. "The school is a big part of the community and I'm really, really thankful."



Joëlle Jeanson, a first-year Grade 6 teacher at École Howden in St. Boniface: "It's good to give them the options."

## Grade 6

The year is 2020. All of Joëlle Jeanson's 24 students have access to a touch-screen laptop. They can tap or type assignments, or they can speak into a microphone and watch their words appear as if a ghost is helping with their homework.

"In Grade 6, I find it's good to give them the options: 'Do you want to type it?' 'Do you want to write it down on paper?' 'Do you want to talk to your computer?' It works for more students," says Jeanson, a first-year Grade 6 teacher at école Howden in St. Boniface.

Jeanson doesn't consider herself a "techie," but she is passionate about putting laptops in classrooms to help middle-years students write and edit their work.

In Grade 6, students are expected to have basic reading and writing skills; their focus turns to interpretation, comparison, communication, self-reflection and critical thinking. Organization and responsibility become ever-important as they approach high school.

Among the key subjects: the world wars, the diversity of organisms and order of operations in algebra. In English Language Arts, editing is emphasized as they study forms of writing, including letters, posters and speeches.

Jeanson's students are mesmerized by their short stories on their laptops; many of them are wearing headphones while they edit.

In Room 24, Jeanson teaches students the dictate tool and Immersive Reader, a program that allows students to listen to their words, in English or French. Assistive technology equips all students with bonus tools, but it can be life-changing for those who are catching up to their peers, she says,



Ecole Howden has a no-screen policy, so students are expected to store their phones in their backpacks during class time. While that doesn't address the endless array of distractions available on the laptops, Jeanson says she's always scanning screens and intervenes when necessary. She also has the power to turn off a student's WiFi connection.

Reuben Garang, a father of four students — Grade 4, 6, 9 and 11 — in the River-East Transcona School Division, said he wants to see more educators embrace technology in their classrooms.

"There's so much technology outside that the education system needs to adapt to, to be able to meet the needs of the next generations," says Garang.

"Schools need to be creative in making sure that students are prepared toward careers that are going to be more technology-based."

Jeanson admits she was anxious about introducing technology in her class, but a tech expert with the Louis Riel School Division allayed her fears.

"That's where we really need to help teachers: to give them the confidence to be able to get the training in technology and incorporate it into their classrooms," she says.

## Grade 7

On the radio, on a personal playlist or on the speakers at a sock hop, they've likely all heard this song before.

It's a Katy Perry classic.

Now, Kimberley Adair-Gagnon wants them to analyze *Roar*'s catchy chorus so her students understand the meaning behind the words they may very well have belted out in the shower this morning.

"The big thing is going beyond what the words actually say on the page. It's moving into analysis, moving into critiquing, making deeper connections," says Adair-Gagnon, a grades 7 and 8 teacher at Windsor Park Collegiate.



Kimberley Adair-Gagnon uses pop culture to help students analyze the meaning behind words they might hear every day.

In Grade 7, students are taught to ask "why" and "how," in addition to "who," "what," "when" and "where." The curriculum outlines math lessons on area, science lessons on Earth's geology and social studies on human impact and urbanization.

Digital literacy is a key theme throughout the year. It's top of mind for Adair-Gagnon, who often incorporates popular culture into her lessons to draw students' attention and encourage reflection about the ways digital media has an influence on their lives as young consumers.

Her students listen to the music as they highlight lyrics that stand out to them. They then mingle to quiz each other on their thoughts about *Roar*'s underlying themes, as well as the significance of Perry's reference to lions and tigers.

Before the period ends, Brennan Beer raises his hand to share his thoughts with the class. It could be a song about protest, he says. Others chime in, offering analysis that it's about bullying or the end of an unhealthy relationship.

Beer later says Adair-Gagnon has picked "better songs" in the past for this exercise, but he enjoys the activity, nevertheless. He says that if he could change anything about school, it would be adding more time for social studies; he's keen on reading and research.

*“The big thing is going beyond what the words actually say on the page. It’s moving into analysis, moving into critiquing, making deeper connections.”*— Kimberley Adair-Gagnon, Grades 7 and 8 teacher at Windsor Park Collegiate

The class just wrapped up a unit about ancient civilizations. Remnants of students' final projects remain, including dolls wearing hand-sewn traditional dress and a Popsicle stick model of the Indus Valley's drainage system. In line with Adair-Gagnon's thinking that middle-years levels are a crucial time to elevate the student voice, she asked students compare an ancient civilization to modern day, however they wanted.

A parent of a middle-years student, Sandra Shwetz says her daughter — who attends a school southwest of Windsor Park — works best when assigned tasks related "to the adult world" and with a detailed marking scheme so expectations are clear.

Shwetz stresses the value of giving students opportunities to make mistakes, tweak projects and redo them, if necessary.

If she has any critique of public education, it's that she wishes all teachers consistently communicated with parents.

"I'm not a proponent of a lot of homework," she says. "It's just difficult, at home, to support what's going on at school when you don't feel like you know what they're doing."



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Nadia Hagman, a Grade 8 teacher at Acadia Junior High in southwest Winnipeg.

## Grade 8

Nadia Hagman is teaching students how the heart pumps blood through their bodies, and at the same time how to wear their hearts on a sleeve.

The evidence can be found scattered throughout her classroom lab, in the form of organ models, podcast scripts and student notes. Also, in the form of open conversations about mental health.

"Schools should definitely see the importance of including those mental-health lessons for all students, regardless of which class they're in, because they can benefit students across the board," Hagman says in her Grade 8 lab at Acadia Junior High.

In Grade 8, students are learning traditional lessons about square roots, water systems and basic first aid. They're also figuring out who they are, as many navigate the peak of puberty.



RUTH BONNEVILLE / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

"Students know that if they're in my class, I'm going to get to know them and we're going to form a relationship with one another that will really foster their learning."

At Acadia Junior High, students begin the level with Hagman and a school psychologist. Hagman invites an expert to offer breathing techniques and healthy coping mechanisms students can use throughout the year.

The school psychologist returns for another lesson later on — an English language arts unit Hagman deems a highlight for her students since they analyze *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Alongside goals of reading, writing, speaking, listening and critical thinking, Hagman's students question the significance of "dementors" in the novel. The dark creatures use their powers to drain humans of all happiness and hope to prevent prisoners from escaping Azkaban.

"Students know that if they're in my class, I'm going to get to know them and we're going to form a relationship with one another that will really foster their learning," Hagman said. "With that relationship, you get trust with one another and that allows them to open up."

In a previous year, after the mental-health unit, one student gave Hagman a copy of *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, with a note inside about how helpful it was to confide in her teacher about her mental well-being. (In the novel, a teacher is a sounding board for his student, the main character, who is trying to cope with the deaths of his best friend and abusive aunt.)





Louis Riel School Division high school phys-ed teacher, Cyril Indome,

The importance of resilience and mental health is increasingly being taught in Manitoba classrooms and school gymnasiums.

Physical education no longer simply means teaching students how to play sports, says Cyril Indome, a high school phys-ed teacher in the Louis Riel School Division. Indome says it's also about ensuring students understand the value of consistent exercise and its implications for both physical and mental health — also known as "physical literacy."

There's a move towards teaching everything from yoga to resistance training, in addition to certain sports.

As for health class, sexually-transmitted diseases, contraceptives and drug use and abuse remain part of the curriculum. However, some teachers are switching things up. Indome doesn't split students up in recognition of gender's fluidity.

Also, "consent is big," he says.

"I'm learning from my students that it's not as easy of a concept as we would think."





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Glenlawn Collegiate Grade 9 student Thea Lechelt in her Indigenous education class.

## Grade 9

A colour-coded map of Canada's provinces and territories.

A map of squiggly lines that represent Canada's watersheds.

A map of treaties across the land that was likely named after "kanata" — a Huron-Iroquois word defined as a village or settlement.

A Grade 9 geography teacher, Sean Oliver has posters plastered on his workplace walls at Glenlawn Collegiate. Throughout the school year, much of his focus is on teaching students about the history of the land they study on.



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Sean Oliver, a Grade 9 social studies teacher and Indigenous education support teacher at Glenlawn Collegiate, reads an excerpt from *The Marrow Thieves*.

"Canada doesn't look the same to all people," says Oliver, who is Red River Métis, situated in the middle of his map-abundant classroom. That's what students learn when they enrol in his course, Canada and the Contemporary World.

In Grade 9, students have some choice in picking courses, but English, math, phys-ed, science and social studies are compulsory. In STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — courses, students learn about everything from polynomials to the periodic table. They make personal connections to texts such as advertisements, editorials and plays in language and humanities courses.

Themes in Oliver's lessons include government, colonialism, citizenship, immigration and the refugee experience. Typically, his class is full of participation and opinion, which means he's part-teacher, part-debate moderator.

Erin Di Gioia is one of the students who isn't afraid to voice her opinion in class. She shoots her hand up when Oliver asks the class if they think Christopher Columbus is a hero or villain. "Hunting people to extinction? That's just not right," Di Gioia responds, adding Columbus tortured Indigenous people.

A self-described political junkie, she's enrolled in a Métis, First Nations and Inuit history course next year. History and debate aside, Di Gioia's favourite thing about school is the field trips, and she wishes there were more.



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Glenlawn Collegiate Grade 9 student Liam McKnight in his Indigenous education class.

Oliver's class recently took a trip to see *The Mush Hole* at Manitoba Theatre for Young People. The performance explores the lives and spirits of children forced to attend the infamous Mohawk Institute Residential School.

He also invites elders to do traditional teachings. The lessons are a stark contrast to decades-long history lessons based on textbooks depicting one-dimensional people and dreamcatchers.

"It's important as teachers that we're flipping the narrative and that we're decolonizing education," says Oliver, who doubles as Glenlawn's Indigenous education support teacher.

For him, that means analyzing the advanced societies that existed prior to colonization, discussions about the fourth level of government and making sure both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students feel comfortable in his classroom.

"It's easy to think bad things about people based on who they are if you don't understand the impacts of colonialism and treaties and the Indian Act," he says. "I'm by no means some saviour, but education is so important."

Louis Riel School Division encourages its teachers to follow the Circle of Courage, a four-pronged teaching model based on Indigenous principles of youth development: generosity, belonging, mastery and independence.

Comprised of the medicine wheel colours, the circle is visible in many classrooms in Manitoba, including Room 206 at Glenlawn.



MAGGIE MACINTOSH / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Portage Collegiate Institute Grade 10 teacher Mark Essay uses his sense of humour in class.

## Grade 10

It's the opposite of take-your-kid-to-work-day at Portage Collegiate Institute.

Natalie Smoke has joined her daughter's third-period English class on a recent morning in downtown Portage la Prairie. She is seated at a desk beside her 16 year old, who appears mortified and enthused at the same time.

A similar scene plays out in Room 67 whenever a guardian accepts Mark Essay's invitation to visit his Grade 10 classroom when a teen is consistently missing his lessons.

A bit of embarrassment is Essay's quick fix for fractured attendance.

In Grade 10, students are expected to become comfortable with the writing process, be able to formulate extended responses and read and comprehend. Teenagers have choices when it comes to core subject levels and electives, but they are all working to obtain a minimum of 30 credits to graduate.

In order to meet those requirements, they have to show up.

That's why principal Gregg Waldvogel said PCI hires staff to track absences and do outreach with families if students have attendance issues. It's especially critical to crack down on attendance in Grades 9 and 10 so students develop consistent patterns to graduate, he says.

"We work hard on attendance," he says. "With regular attendance, you're going to have success."

The school's breakfast program, child-care centre and specialty courses such as hairstyling also draw students. More than 85 per cent of the school's 1,100 students show up each day.

*"Engagement is key. I always try to start a class with an activity that pulls them in... and then weave that into the content."* — Portage Collegiate Institute Grade 10 teacher Mark Essay

The aptly-named Essay said students start to take attendance seriously after their parents have taken him up on his invitation. It's a last resort for the mostly laid-back teacher who uses his sense of humour in class, but he swears by it.

There are other attendance-encouragement methods in his repertoire.



"Engagement is key. I always try to start a class with an activity that pulls them in... and then weave that into the content," he says, moments before leading a comprehension test review disguised as a game of Battleship.

Student teams plot where they want their ships to be on a map and submit their papers to Essay. They then take turns answering review questions to earn the right to guess a co-ordinate on the master map in an attempt to sink each others' ships.

The winning team deals the decisive blow with the correct spelling of A-R-G-U-M-E-N-T and an accurate guess of the last ship's remaining square: G2.

The real victory, Essay says, is that students reviewed grammar, literary devices and the plot of *The Pearl*, a novel the class read earlier in the semester. Distracted learning and connecting student experiences to the curriculum should be emphasized in all classrooms, he says.

Abigail Smoke is asked later about what motivates her to attend class.

"I like Mr. Essay," she says with a shrug. "He's fun."

## Grade 11

Call it Cloud 11.

"You're not a newbie. You understand how high school works. You get it. You're not the biggest fish, but you're still a pretty big fish... and yet, you don't have that looming pressure of graduation hanging over you," teacher Geret Coates says, describing why Grade 11 is an ideal level to be a student.

That's especially true for St. James Collegiate students who are dog lovers. Charlie, Coates's beloved golden retriever, is the school's emotional support dog.



St. James Collegiate teacher Geret Coates and his golden retriever Charlie.

A trained professional, Charlie roams the halls, visits the main office and hangs out in Coates's classroom for all to pet and cuddle.

In Grade 11, students sort through optional courses of all kinds to tailor schedules to reflect their interests — aside from mandatory English, math, social studies and phys-ed credits. Even then, there are usually course options in core subjects. For example, essential math, applied math and pre-calculus.

In Room 206 at St. James Collegiate, Coates teaches students to make connections between texts and the world at large, take risks with their writing and put different genres on trial.

Rather than study Shakespeare this year, his students are flipping through pages of suspense novel *Killing Mr. Griffin*, first-person narrative *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* and *Stepping Stones: A Refugee Family's Journey*, in which all images are illustrations made of stones.

Coates pulled out his own box of rocks when his students studied the picture-book. He opted to ask them to summarize their thoughts, not on paper, but with their own creations made of stones. The learning was in the discussion and communication of ideas, he says,



recalling the lesson in his classroom on a recent afternoon.

Outside formal courses, Coates is just as keen on creativity. He's the teacher supervisor for St. James Collegiate's Youth in Philanthropy group and gay-straight alliance. Hand-painted flags for all identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella are hung up outside his classroom.

Coates's high-school didn't have a GSA, but he says — followed by a chuckle — that he may not have had to move to Winnipeg from Brandon to be himself had things been different. It has only been about five years or so since he started to feel "fully comfortable" having a photo of his husband up in his classroom.

A father of triplets in Grade 11 in the St. James-Assiniboia School Division, Charles Ramjug echoes Coates's thoughts on the importance of representation in schools. He said his daughters have never been taught by someone who looks like them.

"When you look at, case in point, at the staff pictures of the staffing of schools, they're not reflective of the communities," Ramjug says.

As the education system continues to evolve in Manitoba, Ramjug said he's hopeful the list of teachers of colour in classrooms across the province will continue to grow and there will be an increased value placed on cultural competence in education.

## **Grade 12**

Anela Donesa wishes she had more time.

So does John Mark Pagulayan. And John Paul Christian Jumao-as.

The friends, all in their final year at Maples Collegiate, agree; deciding on a career path at age 17 or 18 is overwhelming.

When asked — for the umpteenth time — what they plan to do next year, they all pause, just as they did when their Grade 12 English teacher asked the class if anyone could recap an earlier lesson about the purpose of inquiry. In both cases, nobody is 100 per cent confident in their answer.

In Grade 12, students are preparing for a life outside a structured school day after being conditioned to plan their lives around a bell for more than a decade. It could be post-secondary school, work or maybe something else.



Lindsay Brown teaches Grade 12 English at Maples Collegiate.

"Most of my cousins are nurses, my aunt too. I got influenced since they said it's good money. Nursing is a good job, but I want to learn more about the other stuff I'm interested in, like filmmaking," Donesa, sitting at a desk next to Pagulayan and Jumao-as, says between classes.

The 17 year old's choice for September is a University of Manitoba program that allows students to explore one or more target degree programs — for Donesa, arts and nursing — during their first year.

"Grade 12 is about a last hurrah in terms of one phase of their life and trying to navigate how to transition into a world after high school, and I think for a lot of them, they are grappling with both panic and a sort of sadness," says Lindsay Brown, who teaches Grade 12 English at Maples Collegiate.

That's why Brown puts students' interests at the centre of assignments. For example, Donesa is doing an inquiry into how this year's Academy Awards Best Picture winner *Parasite* can be an educational tool, rather than just entertainment.

Literacy aside, Brown's mandate is to teach students how to consume media critically, build honest relationships and be socially responsible citizens. Along the way, Brown wants students' projects to allow them to study things they care about and explore potential career interests — and to do so in a classroom that welcomes students of all identities.

A note by the entrance states the classroom, which is decorated in media-literacy posters and pride flags, is a safe space. Brown prefers to be identified with "they" and "them" pronouns.

*"Grade 12 is about a last hurrah in terms of one phase of their life and trying to navigate how to transition into a world after high school, and I think for a lot of them, they are*

*grappling with both panic and a sort of sadness."*— Lindsay Brown, Grade 12 English teacher at Maples Collegiate

Donesa, Pagulayan and Jumao-as say they all find the environment helpful for their learning, as well as the way Brown builds relationships with them and encourages small discussion groups.

But they also all point to one thing they feel is missing from their high-school experience: an accredited internship program that would allow them to explore their next steps. In Pagulayan's case, it's a tourism degree. For Jumao-as, a health-care aide program.

"It's helpful to be prepared on what to expect for the future," Jumao-as says.

Outside the halls of Maples Collegiate, the Seven Oaks School Division has embraced the Met school model, otherwise known as "big-picture learning." It's an alternative educational approach that is guided by student interests. Students work on passion projects and attend internships, rather than complete traditional lessons with standardized tests.

Jane Samaroo, a final-year teacher adviser at Seven Oaks Met School, says she envisions the career-development aspect of the alternative school, located down the street from Maples, will infiltrate schools across the province in the coming years.

Not only do internships allow students to test out careers, but Samaroo says the ability to start compiling a list of references is crucial for life after high school.



**Maggie Macintosh**

*Reporter*

Maggie Macintosh reports on education for the Winnipeg Free Press. Funding for the Free Press education reporter comes from the Government of Canada through the Local Journalism Initiative.

[Read full biography](#)

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