

A Guide for Student Belonging in Public Schools in Manitoba



MASS

Manitoba Association of School Superintendents

Every student deserves to feel a sense of belonging in school; to feel safe, respected, and valued. In our Canadian democracy, every child has a right to quality, publicly funded education. The Manitoba Public Schools Act is the governing legislation for public education in our province. It describes education as an important cornerstone of our thriving democracy and as contributing to the development of a fair, compassionate, healthy, and prosperous society. The purpose of the public school system is to serve both students and our society. It does this by attending to the educational needs and interests of students and by teaching them about individual and collective responsibilities as citizens in a democracy.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

In Manitoba, public schooling and our commitment to children is hinged on the following guiding principles:

- 1** Public schools are for *all children*. Every child has the right to public education regardless of their differing identities or needs. Children also have a right to belong in schools.
- 2** Public schooling is a *public service*. Public schools are funded through provincial and local taxation, therefore free for all families
- 3** Public schools are *publicly governed*. Schools are governed through public political processes by people who are elected locally (at the school board level) and provincially. This means that those elected are also responsible for and accountable to the public for the delivery and outcomes of public schooling.
- 4** Public education is a *common good*. Public schooling is meant to benefit individuals, communities, and our greater society.

In order to honour these principles, schools must be places where all children feel like they belong—where all children are equally valued and respected. Policies, practices and guidelines must be enacted in ways that ensure students' sense of belonging. We must also recognize that schools can be places where students are excluded and feel as though they do not belong.

Public Schooling In and As a Democracy

Schooling in a democracy means that schooling must serve the *common good*; that is, schooling is intended to serve individual children while also serving our society. *Schooling as a democracy* means that the values of our democracy are reflected in our schools. Schools are intended to mirror our communities; therefore, schools need to be comprised of all of those who live in our society, regardless of their unique characteristics. Students learn the official curriculum and also learn what it means to work and live with others. In learning about others, children learn to understand and respect those who are different from themselves, while learning about who they are, their communities, and about our liberal democracy.

Documents that Inform Public Schools in Manitoba

Manitoba public schools are informed by various guiding documents of international, national, and local bodies.

INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The United Nations (UN) is an international organization established to promote peace, security, cooperation, and friendly relations among nations. **Canada is a founding member of the UN** and has stated its commitment to the UN mandate including promoting human rights and advancing peace and security. In this context, students and their rights are protected by:

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

The UNCRC is a legal framework that recognizes children as individuals with rights. Under the UNCRC, children are entitled to protection, provision, and participation in matters concerning them. Canada is a signatory of the UNCRC meaning that Canada and its institutions (including schools) are responsible for prioritizing and protecting these rights. This responsibility includes ensuring the respect, safety, and best interest of children in school, as well as providing children with a safe and healthy environment in which to grow into conscious active citizens.

The United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP)

The UNDRIP affirms the equality and distinctness of Indigenous people and emphasizes the rights of Indigenous children to education that is culturally appropriate and affirming and in an environment that is free from discrimination. In 2021, the Canadian government enacted **legislation** that respects the declaration and provides a framework for its implementation.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

The UNCRPD recognizes and protects the rights of people with disabilities, seeks to eliminate discrimination and promote inclusion, and ensures that persons with disabilities can fully participate in society and enjoy the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. The UNCRPD is based on the principles of respect for the inherent dignity of people, individual autonomy, non-discrimination, full participation and inclusion, respect and acceptance of difference, equality of opportunity and accessibility. Article 24 of the convention emphasizes the rights of persons with disabilities to an education that helps in the development of their full potential.

CANADIAN CONTEXT

Although education is the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments, certain Canadian laws and policies must be upheld in all jurisdictions.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is a part of the Constitution Act of 1982 which is the “supreme law” in Canada. The Charter guarantees and bestows fundamental rights and freedoms upon all Canadians. It guarantees that all Canadians are equal before the law and shall not be discriminated against based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, mental or physical disability, and other characteristics not specifically set out by the Charter. All schools in Canada are responsible for upholding the provisions of the Charter and treating all students with dignity and respect.

The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established to inquire into the harmful policies, practices, and impacts of the residential school system in Canada. The final comprehensive report details the stories of survivors and advances practical ways to redress the legacy of residential schools through 94 [Calls to Action](#). The Calls to Action include comprehensive funding for and access to education for Indigenous peoples. It also calls for curriculum and resource development to ensure that all students learn about the history and contributions of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

PROVINCIAL CONTEXT

Schools in Canada are governed provincially and territorially, and so Manitoba schools are guided by provincially developed legislation, regulations, policy, and curriculum, which are the responsibility of elected school boards to implement and uphold. These governing documents include:

The Public Schools Act

The Public Schools Act is the legislation through which schools are governed in Manitoba. It emphasizes schooling as a common good by stating the need for schools to be “inclusive and accepting of all pupils” (p. 108) while recognizing the school’s role in contributing to “a fair compassionate, healthy and prosperous society” (p. 1). The Act charges school boards with the responsibility of creating safe and caring schools that uphold the [Human Rights Code](#).

The Safe and Inclusive Schools Act

This Act legislates respect for human diversity in schools as outlined in [The Manitoba Human Rights Code](#). It also legislates students’ rights to lead activities and establish organizations that promote gender equity, antiracism, disability awareness, and awareness of differing sexual orientations and gender identities. It is intended to promote safe and inclusive school environments that protect and respect all students.

Mamáhtawisiwin: The Wonder We are Born With

Mamáhtawisiwin is a provincial policy framework that aims to advance the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The framework is a response to Actions 62 and 63, which aims to improve the curriculum and provide resources on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples' history and contributions in Canada. The policy framework emphasizes the need for an equitable, inclusive, and diverse public education that fosters a sense of belonging particularly for Indigenous students. It supports the systematic incorporation of Indigenous culture, language, and pedagogy to facilitate the well-being and educational achievement of Indigenous students.

Manitoba Curriculum & Curriculum Frameworks

In Manitoba, curriculum documents and related resources are created by subject experts, often teachers and specialists. All curriculum documents are publicly available for teachers, parents, and community members to access. Through the curriculum, students learn about themselves as independent beings, about others, about the local and global community, about our shared existence in the world, and are prepared for their duties and responsibilities as members of our democratic society.

Appropriate Educational Programming Regulation

This regulation reinforces Manitoba's philosophy of inclusion and its commitment to supporting all students' participation in the academic and social life of schools. Related regulations and standards, such as the [Standards for Appropriate Educational Programming](#) articulate the obligations of schools to remove barriers and provide appropriate educational programming for students. It stresses the importance of providing supports and services to students regardless of whether they require care and support for a brief period, an extended duration, or the entirety of their schooling journey. These documents emphasize the responsibilities of school staff and parents to act in the best interests of students and reinforce the value of students' involvement in decisions concerning their learning and schooling.

How these documents support children's belonging in schools and contribute to the common good

In line with the above documents, Manitoba schools and all staff are legally and ethically obligated to uphold and respect the human rights and dignity of every child, at the same time, ensuring that the rights of one person or group do not supersede the rights of others. School boards are required to work with their school division's leaders, teachers, staff, students, and families to create school environments that foster mutual trust and respect, value the lived experiences of all students, and ensure that students feel safe. They must provide students with the opportunities to learn about their rights and the rights of others. Principals are charged with ensuring these policies are upheld and that students' rights are protected. In addition, teachers are bound by the Manitoba Teachers' Society Code of Conduct, which maintains that a teacher's first professional responsibility is to their students. Finally, schools must be shared spaces where every individual learner is respected, valued, and protected, and where students learn and foster positive relations with one another.

BELONGING IN SCHOOLS

What is Belonging?

Belonging is an innate psychological human need that enhances students' sense of well-being. Belonging is the sense of feeling personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others. For many Indigenous peoples, belonging is about understanding who you are, where you come from, why you are here, and where you are going. It is important to note that one's sense of belonging is not static, but rather, it is dynamic and can change according to variations in the social environment. Belonging is also not just a feeling, but is enacted, requiring the people with whom individuals share a space to interact with one another in a respectful, safe, and caring atmosphere.

Who Belongs?

Because public schools are for all students, all students have a right to feel that they belong. However, some students have faced—and still face—discrimination and exclusion, making some students' sense of belonging more fragile than others. Students from marginalized groups have sometimes been treated differently in schools. Therefore, school leaders, teachers, staff, and communities have a responsibility to critically consider their school's context and practices, and work towards ensuring a sense of belonging for all students all of the time.

Why does Belonging Matter?

Students spend many hours of their days—and many days of their young lives—in school spaces. Schools, therefore, are important contributors to students' social lives and social well-being. In Manitoba's diverse society, it is imperative to consider the ways in which schools create environments that foster a sense of belonging and inclusion for all students. A strong sense of belonging has positive effects on students':

- psychological, social and emotional well-being;
- self-esteem;
- peer relations;
- motivation and good academic performance.

When students feel that they belong, they do better in school, are healthier and happier, and have positive relationships with others.

What Hinders a Sense of Belonging?

When students do not have a strong sense of belonging, it harms their well-being, relationships, motivation, and school success. Several factors may impede a student's sense of belonging, including:

- **not being proficient in the language of instruction;**
- **a lack of connection with educators and peers;**
- **negative interactions with peers and educators;**
- **mental health challenges;**
- **racism, microaggressions, and experiences of exclusion;**
- **unwelcoming/inaccessible physical spaces and lack of representation of identities within the curriculum and in resources such as books.**

Given these factors, schools must consider the barriers to creating a sense of belonging for students and find ways to address these challenges. These factors should not be considered the "fault" of the student or the student's "perception," but rather, these experiences are the responsibility of the school to consider and address in partnership with families and communities.

Ways to Foster Belonging in Schools

Belonging is neither static nor universal. Each student, even when they appear to have similar characteristics, may experience belonging differently. Creating positive spaces of belonging for students requires careful thought and intentional planning. Creating an environment where children belong can be achieved, in part, through:

- **implementing and monitoring inclusive policies and practices;**
- **ensuring the school activities, practices, curriculum, and resources represent all students, their languages, races, cultures, religions, gender identities, abilities, and so on;**
- **enacting culturally responsive teaching;**
- **creating safe and inclusive physical school spaces;**
- **creating and implementing anti-oppressive practices;**
- **fostering social interactions, peer supports, and collaboration;**
- **engaging the community;**
- **engaging student voice and participation;**
- **providing appropriate supports for students to meet their particular needs; and engaging students in ongoing conversations about their sense of belonging and taking their observations seriously;**
- **fostering positive relationships in classrooms.**

This is by no means an exhaustive list. To avoid tokenism, school leaders, teachers, staff, and communities need to critically consider their schools' practices and how they affect students' sense of belonging.

Critical Reflection and Questions

Because a sense of belonging is unique to every child and is dependent on their particular identities, experiences, contexts and circumstances, cultivating students' sense of belonging is an ongoing endeavour. Belonging is not simply "achieved." School leaders, staff and the community must be constantly observing and critically reflecting on their practices. The questions below are designed to guide critical conversations and reflections on belonging.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK AS YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR OWN SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

1. In what ways is belonging actively fostered? What policies, practices, guidelines, activities support belonging? How well are these understood by students, staff, families, and the community?

2. What informs decisions about which activities and programs to include or exclude in your school space? Who is served by these activities and who is left out?

3. How does your school space create opportunities for meaningful student interaction with others (peers and staff)? Are parents and communities meaningfully involved?

4. Does your school space recognize the traditional lands/territories on which it is located and the Indigenous peoples of that land? How is this recognition reflected in the physical space, in practices, and in relationships?

5. How is conflict (between and with students, staff, and families) addressed? Are these considered opportunities to bridge differences and build understandings? How do we support students, teachers, staff, parents, and communities to engage in disagreement that builds understanding, empathy, and respect?

6. Are there physical, structural, scheduling, language, or other barriers that limit students' sense of belonging?

7. How well are all students' identities reflected in the school space? In what ways do resources, curriculum, and school activities reflect the students and school community? Who is reflected/not reflected?

8. In what ways are students involved in decision-making in your school space? Are there ways to include more students more meaningfully?

9. How well do all staff, families, and students understand the purpose of public schooling? How familiar are they with the governing documents that inform public schools (found on pages 2-4)?

10. Who is excluded? Are students pulled-out from classrooms, suspended, secluded, excluded, not invited, opting out, etc.? Why?

11. How does your school involve students in discussions about their sense of belonging? In what ways are students engaged with learning about their rights, including the Convention of the Rights of the Child, The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, etc.

These questions are just a starting place and can be revised and further developed for particular audiences. There is no single best approach to evaluating students' sense of belonging. It is role of public schools and the responsibility of school leaders, teachers, staff, and communities to ensure students' sense of belonging—for all students, in all ways, all of the time.

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