
Back to School in a Pandemic: COVID-19 Left Educators, Parents, and Students Frustrated and Forced to Innovate Throughout the Fall of 2020

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For the past decade, Right To Play's Promoting Life Skills in Aboriginal Youth (PLAY) program, which is led by youth mentors, has been working with Indigenous communities to help youth build leadership skills, resilience, and physical and mental health.

I work at Right To Play and, since COVID hit, I've watched as program managers and mentors have adapted to changing youth needs in more than 70 Indigenous communities – many remote, and some in total lockdown – and tried to provide support at a distance and maintain a sense of consistency, connection, and hope. The team has shipped boxes filled with activities and supplies. Mentors have organized virtual cooking classes and art lessons, outdoor scavenger hunts, Elder teachings, mental health initiatives, and even an online symposium.

In the fall, PLAY program officers usually fan out to partner communities to help mentors kickstart programs. But this year, with some communities still not permitting outside visitors, looked very different.

"We're planning as though COVID is going to continue through the full program year," says Rachel Mishenene, RTP's executive director of Canada programs, who's based in Thunder Bay. "Each community mentor is doing what they feel is going to meet the needs of the mentors and youth in their community. And we're thinking a lot about remote learning, and what possibilities it might open up for us and our youth in the future."

Since September, back to school uncertainty has wreaked havoc in the lives of students, parents, and teachers, as well as non-profits and charities. As schools struggled with ever-changing protocols, many organizations that run programs in school and community spaces were left scrambling to find alternative locations. Charities that had moved to online programming continued to try to figure out how to create meaningful engagement and bridge the tech gap experienced by some participants. Now, with the pandemic's second wave in full swing, many organizations are trying to respond to changing community needs while managing their own shifting operations.

The Philanthropist spoke to organizations and individuals about how they're coping and their outlook for the next few months.

High school consequential

When Jessie's Centre welcomed a new cohort of pregnant women and young moms at a high school classroom in downtown Toronto this fall, the space had a very different feel than it usually does. Plexiglass now surrounds each desk and, unlike in previous semesters, the 12 students aren't all in class at once. To respect social distancing, Jessie's has broken its small group into two – six mothers attend for a two-day period, and then the classroom switches over to the other group. The rest of the time, students work remotely.

"One of the main concerns for the parents was not so much themselves, but the children," explains executive director Maritza Sanchez. "That's [why] we staggered programs in the way that we did."

Founded in 1982, Jessie's Centre supports pregnant teens, young mothers, and parents and their children with high school classes, perinatal programs, counselling, and other parenting and life supports. After shifting some programs online in March, it partially reopened in mid-August and began offering blended programs.

Jessie's has been trying to reduce technology barriers by lending out computers to students. While access to tech has been an issue, having the space and time to focus on schooling may be the most daunting challenge. For participants who decided not to send their children to daycare or school this fall, Sanchez says, "They're talking about how challenging it is to be able to focus with their children at home and not having the space to be able to do their studies. Many live in one-bedroom or bachelors. There's a major issue with the inadequacy of housing."

A different look for after school

The back to school flurry also looked different at Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada this year. Typically, its 750 clubs, many of which run programs in school gyms and cafeterias, would be prepping to welcome children and youth. But with some schools not allowing third-party programming, this year's preparations were more difficult.

"We had clubs scrambling to respond to policies that were changing jurisdiction to jurisdiction, week to week, sometimes day to day," describes CEO Owen Charters. "We're probably running about 50% to 60% of total, which means there's a lot of kids out of programming, a lot of kids who are probably going straight home."

When the pandemic first started, BGCC shifted from filling their buses with kids to filling them with food to meet the emergency needs of families. They also moved to online and remote programming.

“It’s an area of business we never thought we’d be in because part of our mandate is to undo the effects of being online all the time,” says Charters. “But it’s opened up new possibilities for us.”

One benefit is being able to reach students who might not have sought out programs before. “There are plenty of children and youth out there in vulnerable situations who probably would never come through a club. It’s too much of an institution, it’s too big a step,” says Charters. “But now we have an opportunity to reach out and build relationships through these virtual tools.”

This fall, BGCC clubs have offered a mix of virtual and in-person programming. The in-person programs limited the size of groups to six or seven children for every club leader and were outdoors where possible. The smaller groups mean some program wait lists have grown. Meanwhile, some clubs, like the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Halifax, have focused on digital: they’re offering a range of free, hour-long virtual after-school programs for children aged six to 18.

As BGCC braces for winter, Charters’ team is thinking about more adaptations to keep kids safe. They’re also planning for how to get in-person programming back up and running quickly when restrictions are relaxed again, so it doesn’t take as long as it did this past summer. “Online tools are lovely, but they’re no substitute for keeping those kids active and engaged.”

Staying in stage one

For Isabel Pérez-Doherty, YWCA Canada’s director of philanthropy and strategic impact, the back to school transition wasn’t much of a transition at all. Both Pérez-Doherty and her partner are immuno-compromised, so they opted for online classes for their seven-year-old daughter.

“In my household, we haven’t moved from stage one,” says Pérez-Doherty. That means that instead of having the much-needed moment of respite many parents have enjoyed, Pérez-Doherty is still juggling her daughter’s online learning and a full-time job.

“You have to be coordinating all the meetings, all the work and the online sessions with the teachers. You cannot disconnect fully from your child,” she describes. “There are constant interruptions to your workflow. There are demands from the teacher that require you to be present in a specific task at specific time.”

Reducing her hours isn’t an option at the moment. And, without family nearby – Pérez-Doherty and her husband moved to Canada from the UK five years ago – she feels stuck. “I am a newcomer to Canada, which means in these times, my network and the people that I can rely on is pretty much zero,” she says. “At the beginning, we had some energy to deal with everything. You stress and you worry, but you have some energy. I compare that March time with now. It’s not sustainable. I don’t think I can continue with this situation for longer than a month.”

Pérez-Doherty wishes there had been more forethought from governments on how to manage both the back-to-school transition and a possible second wave. “It’s been a very big disappointment as a parent. And I know many have that feeling that our leaders provincially have not been able to step up to the plate.”

One thing she hopes will become more of a focus as governments plan for recovery is building an economy that works for women and caregivers with income supports, like a basic income, to match.

Navigating back to school as a newcomer

Lack of child-care leads to greater isolation for many immigrant women. Pre-pandemic, Vancouver’s Pacific Immigrant Resources Society provided child-minding services alongside language lessons and leadership classes to allow mothers to focus on themselves and their studies. When lockdowns started, that support disappeared. Even though online lessons provided more flexible learning times, mothers struggled to find both the time to complete online lessons and the tools.

“You might have the husband at home working on a device and the kids may be at home working on the device and the mom’s last in line,” says executive director Mariam Bouchoutrouch. “Sometimes there’s an attitude of, it’s just learning language or a leadership class. It’s not as important as school or paid work.”

This has been hard on the women PIRS works with, 30% of whom arrived in Canada in the past year. Even with the reopening of schools and some daycares, challenges remain.

Navigating changing educational and health information is difficult for those with low English language and literacy skills. PIRS’s support workers provide interpretation and ensure mothers have the information they need to make decisions about their children’s health and learning.

With many school spaces closed to third-party partners, and some families opting not to send their children back to school or daycare, PIRS opted to continue offering language lessons online. Many mothers have welcomed the flexibility and accessibility, but without childcare support, even flexible programs can be difficult to complete. Low digital literacy is also a barrier. PIRS has partnered with Burnaby Neighbourhood House to provide in-person digital literacy training so its clients have the skills to fully participate in online classes and discussions.

Bouchoutrouch says the agency is now thinking about how it can continue to create meaningful pathways for newcomer women to participate in Canadian society in spite of the pandemic’s barriers. “We’re an organization that’s focused on social inclusion. So one of the things on our minds looking forward is how we can ensure that these newcomer women can become part of creating the changes that need to happen in our society.”

Keeping graduation in their sights

The start of the school year is a cause for celebration at Pathways to Education. Local chapters host pizza parties for new grade nine students so they can get to know each other. Students meet with their tutors and mentors to set goals and talk about their aspirations. But this fall, the pizza parties got the kibosh, and tutoring moved online. And with schools preoccupied with

implementing their own safety measures, programs were slow to start.

Because the organization was already using digital tools pre-pandemic, it allowed them to transition more easily to remote programming when the lockdown began, says CEO Sue Gillespie. The organization offers some of those programs on a low-bandwidth video platform that makes lessons more accessible to students with lower-quality internet connections. Still, some students are left out.

“We did an informal assessment [at the start of the pandemic] and found that about 20% to 30% of students did not have access to the internet,” says Gillespie. “They didn’t have connectivity at home, or they didn’t have hardware. And suddenly they didn’t have access to places with public wifi or devices. So the first thing we did is distribute the computers and hardware that we had within our tutoring and mentoring sites to the students that needed them the most.”

Getting tech into the hands of students remains a work in progress, but the challenges aren’t limited to computer access. Many teens are balancing school classes and tutoring with part-time jobs. “We’re finding that more and more, they’re the only people working in their families, so we’re trying to support the youth and their families to find that right balance between being able to continue to participate in education and have the time to do the homework with having a job and contributing to the family income,” she says.

What about those Grade 12 students who are dreaming of the next step in their lives and wondering what it will look like in the new normal? Gillespie says tutors continue to guide them through the transitions ahead. “We’re trying to remind ourselves of the positive things that are happening and making sure that every step and every day of school is a day closer to graduation and a brighter future.”

Shifting to meeting basic needs

Maison Mosaik prides itself on its open-door policy. The Montreal-based community organization serves close to 200 west-end families with children up to five years of age, offering programs that promote child development and positive family relationships.

When COVID-19 hit, Maison moved some of its family programs online, but online options were no substitute for open doors and a welcoming space. Through outreach workers, its team heard that many families were struggling to put food on the table, so they started a food pantry in June. Families book in by appointment so they can be alone in the space while they shop.

The appointments have been a welcome source of staples and support. “There’s been a great deal of fear, concern, and worry among parents,” says Maison’s coordinator, Teresa Kaeser. “You can see in their faces when they come in that they’re relieved to see us, and everything comes out. People need to vent, to be reassured.”

In the lead-up to school re-openings, Maison staff realized many children didn’t have the supplies they needed. They were able to provide clothes and school materials to bridge the gap. “Parents were desperate for those items,” says Kaeser. “Their kids had grown over the summer and they didn’t have clothes to send them to school in. We’ve always had kids who weren’t ready for school, didn’t have the proper clothing, but it doubled or tripled this year.”

Clothing wasn't the only stress point. "It was such a difficult time for children going into kindergarten and Grade 1," adds Kaeser. "Parents couldn't go into the school, couldn't talk to teachers, or get a sense of the classroom. Many of those little four- or five-year-old pumpkins were so scared. That would be the last way I'd want my little one to start to school."

With Montreal now confirmed to be in the red zone until the end of November, Maison plans to continue to offer online programs, but its team is also exploring how to offer in-person programs to smaller groups when restrictions are lifted. They'll also continue running their food bank and clothing boutique, doubling their open days from two to four per week. "Our mission is to promote the global development of children," says Kaeser. "But when your basic needs aren't met, you can't think about education."