

Featured Mental Health Initiative

Dr. Clark Indigenous Healing Garden Dr. KA Clark Elementary School (Fort McMurray, AB)

Background

Dr. Clark Elementary School is a member of the Fort McMurray Public School Division. The school is comprised of students from diverse backgrounds and nationalities, with many languages spoken in the school hallways. The school takes a multifaceted approach to learning, holistic wellness, and community engagement by offering various support programs to students, such as a breakfast program, junior-skills classes, and intensive individual intervention programming for students with learning disabilities.

Promising Practice

The Dr. Clark Indigenous Healing Garden will be a physical space where students can unwind and relax while also providing them with the opportunity to create a sustainable garden that will include traditional cedar trees, benches, and planter boxes. This initiative will also teach students about the Seven Sacred Teachings through hands on activities supported by local elders. Students will work together to grow the four sacred medicines using indoor grow towers and then transplanting them to the healing garden in the spring. Students will actively participate in the planting and growing process each year and will create a tradition focused on connecting with nature.



In addition to experiences the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, families in the school community were devastated by a flood in April of 2020 while at home in isolation. Many were evacuated from their homes and some still have yet to return. The community is rebuilding itself socially, emotionally, physically and financially, so creating this safe outdoor space for the community has been a positive contributing factor in the regrowth.

This initiative will facilitate cross-curricular connections between social studies, science, and physical education. Staff and students will be able to use the gardens as a safe space to practice coping and healing strategies to help build to confidence, self-esteem, and resiliency. Overall, students will get the opportunity to learn about traditional ways of connecting with nature, local Indigenous traditions, and be able to use the garden as a place to focus on building positive mental health practices.

Impact

The Healing Garden will be accessible to the greater school community outside of school hours so that students and their families can access the garden and reap the benefits of being surrounded by nature whenever they so choose. Teachers will be able to use the space as an outdoor classroom, where they can invite local elders to teach students about resiliency and the Seven Sacred Teachings. Students will be able to take pride in growing and caring for the gardens, creating a sense of accomplishment and success through teamwork and cooperation.

All students will be able to experience a hands-on approach to learning, growing and caring for this garden, connecting their learnings with those of the Indigenous Peoples of Treaty Seven. All exceptionalities, cultures, ages, and demographics will be made to feel accepted and at home in this natural space.

Sustainability

This initiative will continue each year, as students will be able to tend to and care for the garden at various times each season. The overall impact of the garden and the sense of community that it will foster amongst staff and students will help to improve morale and foster a stronger sense of connectedness. Once the initial trees and garden boxes have been put in place, the growing and maintaining the grounds will be sustained by school community members.

Modifications

Here are suggestions to modify this approach for different learning environments.

- Create an indoor version of a healing garden if access to an adequate outdoor space is not available
- Partner with your local [Friendship Centre](#) to work together to teach students about Indigenous Ways of Knowing
- Connect students to nature through other ways such as weekly walks in a nearby forest or trail

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