

Creating success for all learners at Wolf Creek Public Schools with Hāpara

At a glance:

Overview: Wolf Creek Public Schools (WCPS) in central Alberta, Canada, comprises 29 schools that serve approximately 7,300 K-12 students. The expansive, largely rural territory served by WCPS takes about 2.5 hours to traverse by car. Nearly 750 or approximately 10% of students in the division self-identify as First Nations, Inuit or Metis.

Challenges affecting Wolf Creek

In 2015, WCPS student achievement levels in areas including graduation rates fell well below the provincial average. Possible contributing factors were believed to include:

- Gaps in academic rigor across the division which affected student achievement in small rural schools
- Low enrollment in rural areas that affected teacher turn over and regularity of course offerings
- Students unable to attend school regularly for reasons outside their control falling behind and potentially dropping out
- High levels of student need in the areas of social-emotional and academic support
- Equity and access issues for students self-identifying as First Nations, Inuit and Metis.



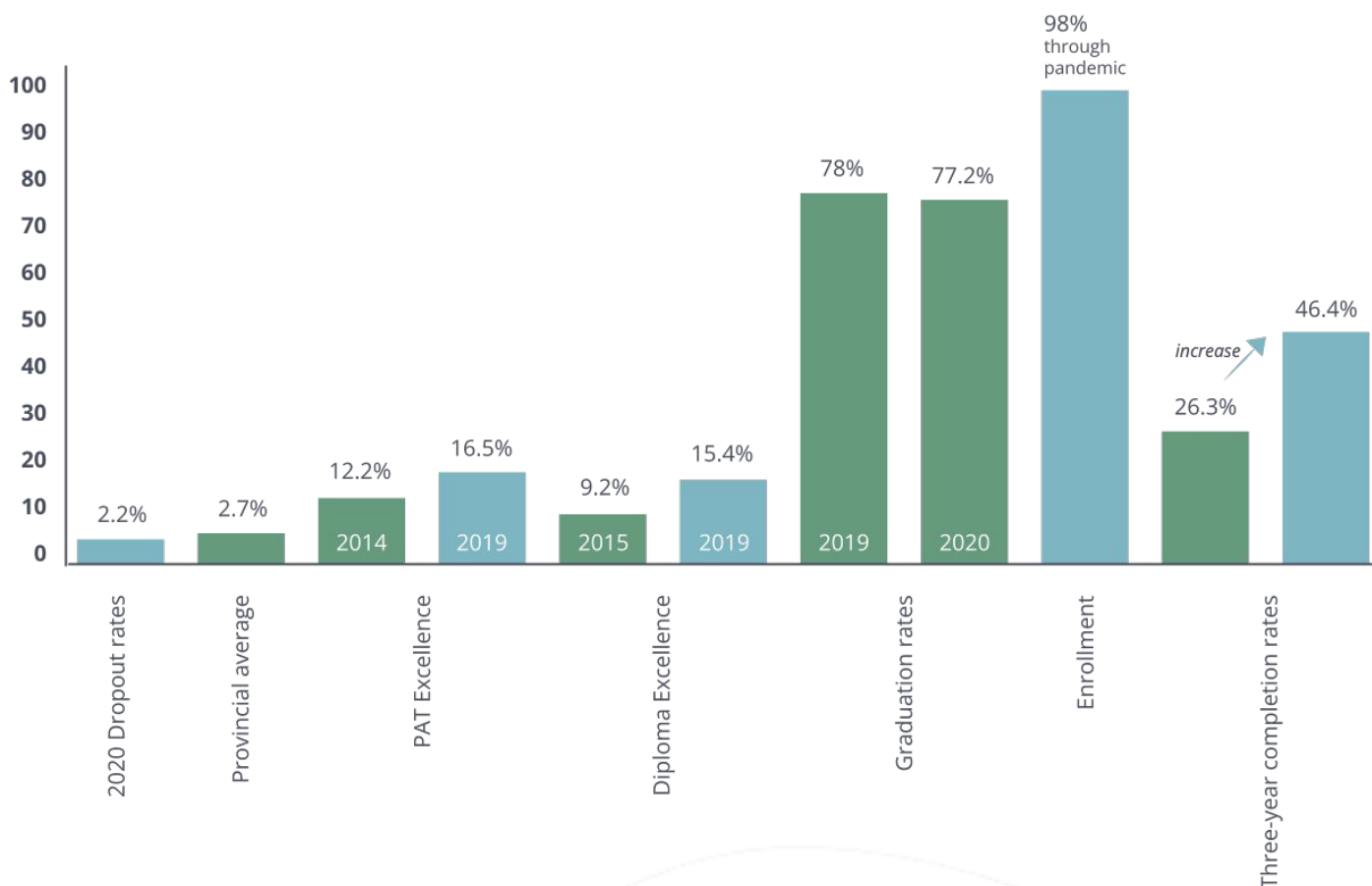
Solutions

An ongoing effort has been made to close the gap for all students based on the needs and priorities identified within the division and province, as reported in their [three-year education plan for 2018-2021](#). Strategies focusing on academic and social-emotional supports address student needs by:

- Increasing access to flexible learning environments, including Hāpara
- Building teacher capacity and strengthening leadership development
- Rolling out the Enhanced Learning Model (ELM) — a series of 64 courses including all high school core classes using [Hāpara Workspace](#)
- Forging partnerships to provide learning and career track opportunities outside the classroom
- Implementing a purposeful approach to support success for students who self-identify as First Nations, Inuit and Metis
- Providing ongoing professional development to lead teachers in cultural teachings, the impact of history, deficit thinking, and instructional strategies through a First Nations, Inuit and Metis cohort.

Outcomes

Achievement data from the Annual Education Results Report shows improvement in various areas in the six years since WCPS adopted the Enhanced Learning Model in the division's nine high schools and rolled out the Hāpara Instructional Management Suite.



- Dropout rates in 2015 and 2016, flagged as high relative to the provincial average, were reduced to 2.2% in 2020, well below the 2.9% target and five points below the provincial average of 2.7.
- PAT Excellence, a K-9 assessment, has improved steadily since 2014, when it fell far below the Alberta average. The percentage of students with this distinction grew from 12.2 % in 2014 to 16.5% in 2019.
- Diploma Excellence, a measure of high school achievement, rose from 9.2% in 2015 to 15.4% in 2019, the last time the test was administered.
- Graduation rates denoted as three-year and five-year completion rates for students entering grade 10 jumped from the low 70s before 2018 to 78 and 77.2 respectively in 2019 and 2020.
- Enrollment at Wolf Creek Public Schools remained at 98% throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.
- First Nations, Inuit, and Metis student three-year completion rates increased from 26.3% to 46.4%, surpassing the provincial target.

Post pandemic results exemplify success of Wolf Creek interventions



“We just tested our students, and about 85% increased their reading levels over the pandemic. We were all ready to attack learning gaps, but that was not our issue,” says Marg Brookwell teacher lead, West Country Outreach School.

These results, coming from a small outreach school, are significant for two reasons. First, they represent a group of students who could be deemed as “at risk for dropping out,” and given another scenario, may have slipped through the cracks during the pandemic.

Secondly, a mere seven years ago, student achievement levels for high school assessment (diploma exams) and K-9 assessment (PAT) fell far below the Alberta average.

To close the gap, the division has worked to create flexible learning environments, build teacher capacity, strengthen leadership development and develop partnerships that open doors to postsecondary opportunities. In light of this ongoing commitment to boosting student achievement, Brookwell, who has taught at WCPS since 1997, adds, “We never stopped teaching and they never stopped learning. It was hard, but we still kept putting in our interventions and using the resources and relationships that we have.”

Technology integration plays a critical role in narrowing the gap. Unlike districts that have contracts with many edtech and digital providers, WCPS has kept it simple. As a result, Hāpara stands out as the key digital resource in place at Wolf Creek prior and during the pandemic, according to Sean Lougheed, Director of Education Services for the division.

“One of the tools that supported Wolf Creek staff and students during the 2020-21 school year while they participated in hybrid learning both online and face to face was Hāpara, an online instruction platform that allows teachers to create and facilitate interactive online instruction,” explains Lougheed.

Since 2015, Hāpara Workspace has increasingly enabled the division to deliver flexible learning options and rigorous content to all high school students through the division’s Enhanced Learning Model, 64 core curriculum courses (math, sciences, social studies and English) developed by many of the division’s most experienced master teachers. Above and beyond the Enhanced Learning Model, several of WCPS’s over 400 teachers have built or adapted courses in Workspace for elementary through high school. Across WCPS, teachers interacted with Hāpara Workspace 156,624 times during the 2020-21 school year, the equivalent of 846 interactions per school day.

Teachers interacted ▼

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772,745 times during the 2020-21 school year, the equivalent of
4,200 interactions per school day.

▲ Students interacted

During that same period, WCPS students interacted with Hāpara Workspace 772,745 times. These nearly 4,200 daily interactions include opening and viewing lessons in Workspace, beginning and submitting work as well as opening resources embedded by the instructor.

“Through the effective utilization of online tools like Hāpara Workspaces and instructional flexibility, WCPS students were able to continue their learning as they transitioned to and from learning at home and at school, which helped to minimize any potential learning gaps for students,” says Lougheed. “Going forward, WCPS will continue to utilize online instruction to support the flexible learning needs of students and families.”

“Equitable access has changed the landscape for learners at Wolf Creek, and Hāpara has helped us improve educational equity because it lets us adapt to learners’ lives,” says Lougheed.



Having access to all the courses they need during the school year and the full curriculum during summer school has positively impacted students’ ability to graduate on time and study what interests them. Previously, a student completing summer school might still be unprepared for the next school year. “That doesn’t happen anymore,” Lougheed emphasizes. “Now, some of our best teachers make our content. It’s rigorous and the results are evident in our test data.”

It has also helped address high teacher burnout and turnover, according to Lougheed. Today, a new teacher may still teach eight different courses at a rural school. But now with ELM, the courses are already built. “Teachers can modify it, make it their own, but they’re not walking in without anything. They’re walking in with hundreds of hours of video content and all of their exam sets already done,” says Lougheed. Additionally that new teacher can reach out at any time for support from the teacher or cohort of teachers who developed the course.

“Equitable access has changed the landscape for learners at Wolf Creek and Hāpara has helped us improve educational equity because it lets us adapt to learners’ lives,” says Lougheed. “Before, to get a good education, they had to get on the bus. Now, we have tools to take the education to where they are, for whatever reason, whether it’s an international rodeo competition, serious health concerns or living very remotely and not being able to get a ride into town.”

Addressing social-emotional barriers to student success

Along with logistical and academic challenges impacting student achievement, many students are dealing with social-emotional issues affecting their learning. In the division's most recent profile of student needs taken before the pandemic, individuals requiring social-emotional support surpassed the number having significant academic needs.

Outreach schools wrap at-risk students in protective layers of support

Historically, one way Wolf Creek has addressed the need for access for its diverse populations is through alternative schools, including five that serve Hutterite colonies and two outreach schools designed to help students in outlying areas. These flexible learning environments that emphasize individualized learning serve students who learn more effectively outside a traditional school setting and individuals who could be deemed at risk for dropping out for many reasons.

Alva Holiday, principal at West Country Outreach School, emphasizes that the barriers for her students are not intellectual. Her priority is to work on anything getting in the way of their education before jumping into academics. Her skilled staff successfully offers various types of school work to meet their academic requirements and goals, which involves extensive training. "Communicating closely with the community and our families, we all work together holistically on the psychological, emotional, physical and intellectual areas so that the whole student is being served," Alva explains.

Teacher and technology lead Marg Brockwell, adds, "There's often been interpersonal conflict, bullying, just getting into substance abuse or anything like that starting down that road. Our junior high program looks to them like they get a lot of freedom, but actually, students are wrapped up in a lot of protective layers when they're here. There are very few opportunities for them to go off the rail."

West Country has also removed competition from the classroom. New students often feel like they're not good learners and have had to compete. "We just say you're not clones. You're individuals. Therefore, your experience has to be individualized," says Holiday. "When they meet their own goals, they get so much positive reinforcement here." Having the ability to provide differentiated assignments for students in Hāpara has been a huge asset for the teachers at West Country in promoting individualized learning.



A flexible platform reduces stress for busy educators

In an outreach setting, students complete their work at a pace they can handle. "I always say to students, do your very best in the circumstances you find yourself in," explains Lacombe Outreach School principal Robert Reid.

Similarly, Reid appreciates not having to get the Workspaces perfect the first time around. "There are going to be mistakes, but that's OK because we need to get this out so that students can get their credits," he says. "One of the things so wonderful about this Hāpara platform is its flexibility because it is so easy to manipulate and tweak."

Here, principals carry an extremely heavy workload that includes teaching and even guidance counseling roles above and beyond the typical responsibilities of the position. Reid is a perfect example. Along with curriculum development, managing staff and directing the maintenance team, he is in charge of the foods program, an agriculture career track. In addition, Reid meets personally with each high school student each month to provide orientation. His students joke that much like a hamster, he never stops moving and is always on the go.

"One of the things so wonderful about this Hāpara platform is its flexibility because it is so easy to manipulate and tweak."
– Robert Reid



"We laugh a lot," says Reid, who adds, "I truly believe that children should experience joy every day in their life, per psychologist Nicholas Hobbs, known for experiential learning."

Yet, in all seriousness, to sustain that dedication to their districts, schools and learners, education leaders like Reid benefit enormously by organizing their workload. The level of convenience Hāpara offers gives busy teachers more time to engage directly with students. "Hāpara is very user-friendly," says Reid. "Probably the thing that I like the most is that all the assignments are in one place. There's an ease of use for me, from adding students to sharing and setting it up."

Hāpara Workspace has created a common language for professional development that wasn't there before, adds Lougheed. "Teachers can talk the same language, not just about the same academic content, but the same exam, video content, or lesson structure." In Lougheed's eyes, Hāpara's role in allowing educators to streamline through collaboration has significantly impacted educators' ability to carry out the initiatives that turned around the numbers and experience for Wolf Creek students.

Preparing Wolf Creek learners for the future they choose

Like educators having a common language, Brockwell notes that students come to her class from other schools already versed in Workspace. "Students are able to move throughout the district and find consistency in Workspace. While some nuances may be different between teachers and schools, they have this foundation with technology."

She believes that this foundation in using an instructional management system is critical to students as they embark on whatever postsecondary endeavor they choose.

Now, not only are learners graduating in higher numbers than previously, they are more broadly prepared. The number of students achieving excellence on the PAT and DIP exams, having doubled or tripled at most WCPS schools, impacts the number of students who qualify for wider options regarding post secondary programming.

Moreover, beyond test scores and metrics, learners completing their studies at Wolf Creek have been equipped to be socially and emotionally independent thinkers who understand themselves and can overcome obstacles to achieve what fits who they are as individuals.

Alberta educational consultant Adelee Penner explains that provincial numbers only begin to tell the complete story, especially for learners who self-identify as First Nations, Inuit and Metis. Taking four and five years to complete high school is typical throughout this province, yet can affect tracking for First Nations, Inuit and Metis students with three-year tuition agreements, elaborates Penner. "Many students will go back to school on their reserve and graduate; however, that isn't reported in Wolf Creek graduation results, so that gap is actually smaller than recorded. While our provincial data is valid, it can't tell the whole story of how education leaders and Indigenous leaders unite to wrap around our kids."