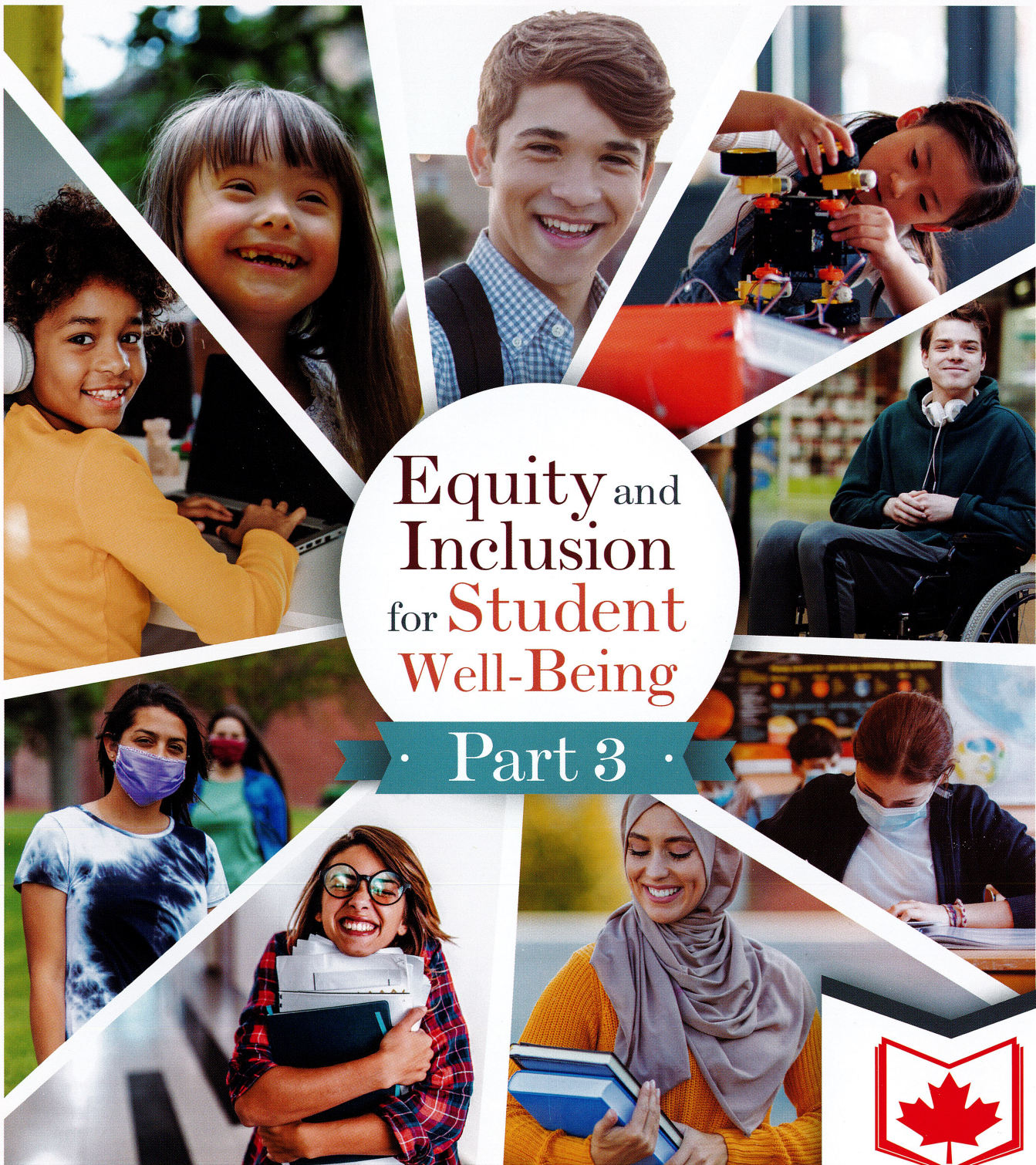


Winter 2020-2021

# Leaders & Learners

The official magazine of the Canadian  
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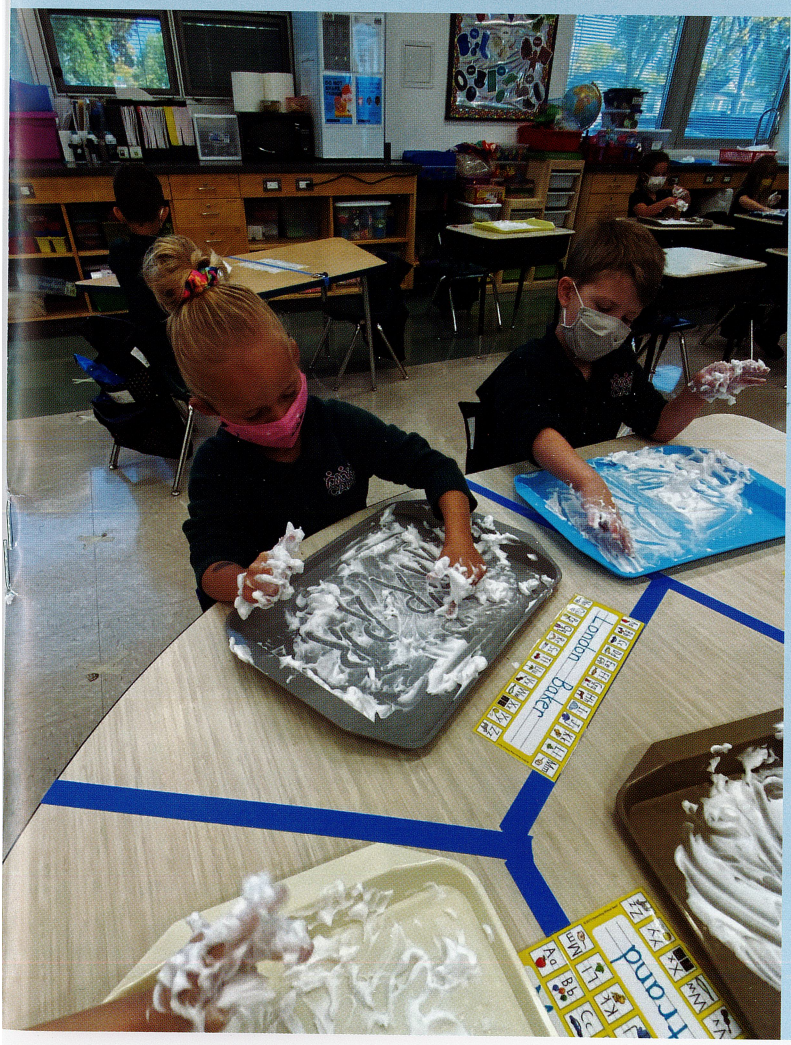
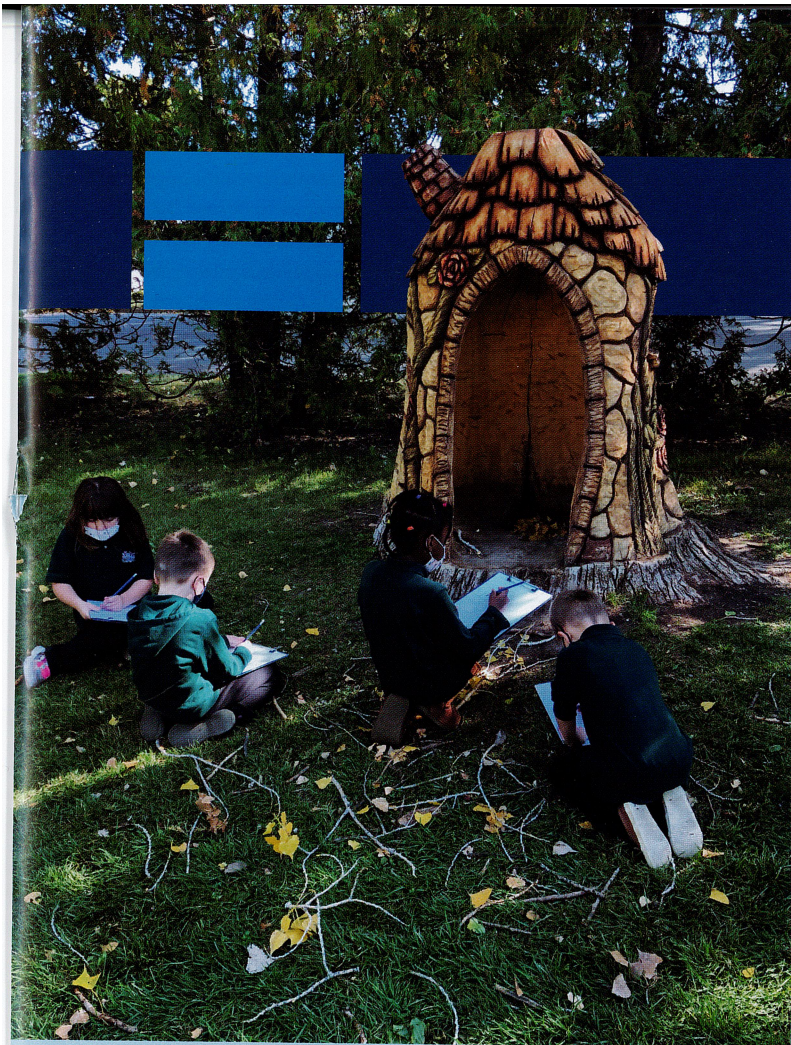
## Equity and Inclusion for Student Well-Being

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# Equity:

## A Successful COVID-19 Response to Support Our School Community

By Teresa Di Ninno and Jeney Gordon,  
Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence  
Public Charter School

The personalized program at the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) is predicated on the concept of equity. Overt teaching of fair versus equal occurs in all classes throughout the year. Students come to understand that each student will receive the support they need when they need it. Within this ideal, students also develop an appreciation and acceptance of differences.

COVID-19, unexpected and sudden, thrust us into a new reality that has confronted us all, and it will continue to do so for some time. We were pushed toward in-school, at-home, and blended learning options and challenged to re-think our strategies and processes for ensuring equity within our student population. In addition, the idea of equity extended to families and staff. It was apparent that the pandemic truly was a test of our own preaching: each person will receive the support needed, when needed.

The first week after the provincial closure, our teachers were completing second term report cards. They focused on reporting student progress and growth, while administration focused on a fact-finding mission: our students' and families' needs. Point-people were designated for key areas: food supplies, housing, mental health, physical health, and interpersonal connections. Priorities were placed on basic needs first, as food from our kitchens and programs was distributed to families and community. Safety and sanitation supplies were delivered to community businesses to help extend their work.

Once immediate priorities were addressed, polling our parents gave us information about the access to technology—and the level of comfort with that technology—in each household. We were able to identify concerns, and we learned from the experiences of global learners to develop an at-home learning model that was responsive to individual needs and would have some common elements for structure and familiarity.

The next step was to develop equitable teams to support learners. In the development of grade pod teams, teachers were supported by educational assistants. Staff experienced with technology was shared among groups. Expertise with online programs, differentiation, and specialized needs were also shared between groups. In this way, each student would have a team





of professionals supported by colleagues to solve problems and respond to questions.

Equity of resources expanded far beyond the classroom and became a crucial aspect of learning. Since 1994, CAPE has been dedicated to its one-on-one computing program. Several years later, it's expanded to include all Grade 4 to 9 students, so each individual can benefit from 24/7 access to an individually assigned iPad for use during the full academic year. CAPE had also strived to build staff capacity in the use of laptops and iPads as teaching tools. This proved to be a great advantage, as we were thrust into the era of online learning. Our vice-principal took the lead in the deployment of the technology, apps, and training.

We distributed additional iPads and laptops and expanded the use of Zoom to reach out to parents, students, staff, board members, School Council members, and the community. Within each instructional pod, tech leaders were identified to support colleagues, students, and parents. Our principal also supported parents with both group instruction and individual guidance, as they adapted to online learning, so they could, in turn, support the children. Teachers and educational assistants focused on teaching and met with students in large groups,

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small groups, and individually. Quickly adapting to online options was a huge learning curve for everyone, but each person was able to access supports, if and when needed.

Equity extended past students, since supporting families and professionals was also of crucial importance. Our principal organized staff meetings to brainstorm individual student programs and family supports—but also to just see each other, bad hair days and all. Staff worked to maintain weekly connections with families. Our educational psychologist focused on the well-being of each student, staff, administrator, and parent, with the support of the entire school community: system leaders, the board of directors, and community health professionals and agencies. Families were made aware of online and face-to-face resources available within the community. She let staff know of available webinars on topics such as stress, anxiety, emotional wellness, social health, and self-regulation.

Our principal, in addition to being our in-house counsellor-of-sorts, organized virtual voluntary staff meetings to talk, share, connect, vent, commiserate, and just laugh. In responding to a student's need for social connections, one of our staff members facilitated virtual recesses. What a simple, brilliant idea! The superintendent sent

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cards to each student celebrating a birthday and to each student needing a bit of a boost. Staff was not forgotten. They, too, got little personal notes once in a while. Teachers dropped off study packages while connecting with students and families. Educational assistants called students and parents to say hello. One of our staff members spearheaded the development of a video, the CAPE Song *When You're Gone*, which was shared on our Facebook page.

Even though the provincial closure of schools has been lifted, equitable supports remain available for students, families, and staff. Whether in class or from home, students are able to access lessons and personnel to assist them with learning. Families continue to be able to use administrative supports for assistance with food supplies, mental wellness, and physical health. Staff input regarding required supports resulted in changes to our academic calendar, to the

provision of release time, and to the planning for time together as a team.

Using distributed leadership and social capital, CAPE was able to provide equitable supports to assist the school community during the pandemic. We know we are on track. The faces of the children who returned to our classes this fall, the messages of thanks from our parents, and the words of thanks from the staff tell us we are. ○

*Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is an alumnus of McGill University and the University of Toronto. She is founder, past principal and current superintendent of CAPE Public Charter School in Medicine Hat, Alberta.*

*Jeney Gordon, B.E.A., B.Ed., Diploma of Vis. Com., is an alumnus of the University of Lethbridge. Jeney has been the principal of CAPE Public Charter School for 15 years.*

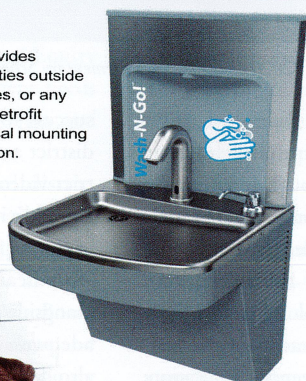
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