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Returning to a Near Normal:

An Absolute Must

By Teresa Di Ninno, CAPE Public Charter School

CAPE's diverse Kindergarten to Grade 9 population has been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions which disrupted learning during the last 18 months.

Anxiety, social challenges, emotional irregularities, behavioural issues, ADHD, learning disabilities of different types, Autism Spectrum Disorders, OT/PT needs, ESL issues, and more are part of the daily lives of our students. Monumental learning gaps were the consequence of repeated learning disruptions, the lack of access to a stable, supportive school environment, stress, isolation, trauma, anxiety, fear, lack of routine, reduction of intensive one-on-one, face-to-face support and intervention, among other factors. These deficits are particularly noticeable in literacy and numeracy.

Sadly, the practice of cohorting significantly reduced student choice, access to off-site learning, and student interactions between mixed-age groups. Students have missed the rich project learning environment for far too long and they are eager to resume these projects. They have also been deprived of proven-effective literacy and numeracy learning opportunities within homogeneous groups.

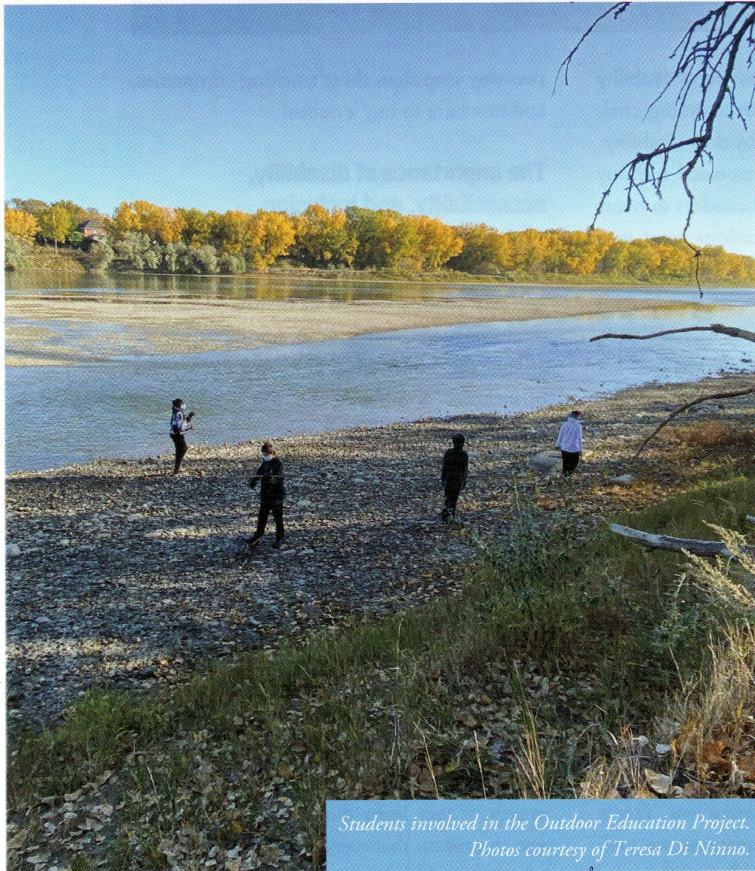
Our Kindergarten to Grade 3 literacy and numeracy assessments indicate that a significant percentage of our 2021-2022 population requires much more intensive and sustained support. For literacy, 84 per cent of our Kindergarten to Grade 3 students require intervention: 59 per cent severe urgent and 25 per cent mild/moderate. For numeracy, 85 per cent of our Kindergarten to Grade 3 students require intervention: 56 per cent severe urgent and 29 per cent mild/moderate. This is in stark contrast to our pre-COVID-19 June 2019 data that indicated that 19 per cent of our Kindergarten to Grade 9 students required severe urgent intervention in literacy and six per cent required mild/moderate intervention. For numeracy, 28 per cent of Kindergarten to Grade 9 students required severe urgent intervention, while 19.6 per cent required mild/moderate intervention.

Staff has noted that the ability of students to function in a classroom has decreased significantly. Basic skills such as raising one's hand to ask a question, walking in line, following directions, taking turns, demonstrating respectful behaviour, paying attention, and having academic endurance have all decreased. Currently, 49.8 per cent of our students require social, emotional, and behavioural supports, as opposed to 31 per cent in June of 2019.

It is imperative that we return to a 'near normal' program with supports, our daily tiered literacy and numeracy blocks to teach focused skills to homogeneous groups of learners and to involve our students in integrated multi-grade community-oriented projects.

CAPE's COVID-19 Safety Plan aims to keep every person in the building and school community as safe as possible. The Board of Directors invested in precautionary measures, including rapid test kits. Students, parents, staff, and all other stakeholders have embraced our safety protocols, including a choice of providing proof of vaccination or letter of exemption or submitting a negative rapid test. The administration is supportive of and attentive to these safety measures. The staff is responsive to and appreciative of the efforts to keep infections as low as possible.

The tiered literacy program has resumed as in the past. However, the numeracy program is seeing significant changes. We have adopted



*Students involved in the Outdoor Education Project.
Photos courtesy of Teresa Di Ninno.*



A few students working on their forensics blood spatter analysis.

the JUMPMath program school-wide and are engaged in staff capacity-building professional development in partnership with Gael James, our local JUMPMath Outreach Manager, and Dr. Lissa D'Amour, our guide through the Math Minds course. Our numeracy team has expanded to include four new staff members and, under the leadership of teacher Andrea Sanders, is facilitating all aspects of the implementation of this program. The team has also developed, piloted, and implemented an assessment tool to gather accurate meaningful information about our students' written numeracy skills.

Projects are back! One of our current offerings is an outdoor education project for Grades 3 and 4, which aims to engage students in the ecology of our local environment with fun, healthy ways to safely enjoy it. Students will learn about the interconnectedness of the global planet, how human interactions have greatly altered nature and planet Earth as a whole, and participants will develop the skills needed to successfully work as a group in a variety of outdoor challenges. Some of our students chose to register for a forensics project in which they will learn about a variety of investigation techniques used in the

real world and apply these techniques to solve a 'crime scene.'

The very young have been particularly impacted by the imposed isolation. As a result, CAPE has implemented a physical education time dedicated to team intramural sports. Each Friday morning, two of our younger classes play against each other. The desired outcome is physical activity, development of social and fair play skills, and having fun.

Establishing relationships at a time when we are all separated and scared is hugely important. CAPE has entered into a partnership with Mother Earth's Children's Charter School (MECCS) and we are hoping to share information and possibly establish student exchange visits between MECCS and CAPE School during the year. Maxine Hildebrandt's students have already started sharing activities with teacher, Sara Fairbrother's students at CAPE by exchanging "All About Me" posters to allow them get to know each other.

Both of our Grade 8 and 9 classes have been engaged in a cultural experience with the College Marcel Doret in Le Vernet, France. They are a part of a pen pal program exchanging friendly letters with students of their own age living in the city of Le Vernet,

which is located close to Toulouse. This program allows our students to build relationships with other students while engaging and modelling the English language. The staff is also planning a similar program with a school in Japan involving several grades.

Our school council is investigating safe activities such as weekend dance classes for cohorts of students, parent-student art classes, ice sculpture weekends, and family movie nights where families can safely socialize and establish supportive relationships. This is especially important for families new to the area or who lack adult support systems.

CAPE believes that our safety plan supports the safe return of these programs and that implementation of these and other initiatives will positively impact our post-pandemic student learning while supporting mental and social wellbeing within our school community. ○


Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is an alumnus of McGill University and the University of Toronto. Teresa began her teaching career in Alberta in 1980. She is also the Founder, Past Principal, and Current Superintendent of CAPE Public Charter School in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

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