

Student Absenteeism Summit Report



WINNIPEG SCHOOL DIVISION

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Summit Overview	4
Keynote Insights	5
Panel Discussion - Lived Experiences: Listening First	6
Breakout Session Insights	7
Themes	12
Opportunities and Recommendations	13
Calls to Action	14
Reflections and Implications	14
Conclusion	15

Executive Summary

The Winnipeg School Division Student Absenteeism Summit brought together educators, knowledge keepers, students, community organizations, researchers, and government officials to examine the complex and interconnected factors influencing student attendance. Across keynote presentations, panel discussions, breakout sessions, and collaborative action labs, participants consistently emphasized that absenteeism cannot be understood as an isolated issue within schools. Instead, it reflects broader systemic realities including factors related to social determinants of health, transportation barriers, intergenerational trauma, and gaps in culturally safe education systems.

A central finding of the summit was that student attendance is fundamentally relational. Students are more likely to attend, remain engaged, and experience success when they feel seen, valued, and connected to caring adults within and beyond the school environment. Belonging was repeatedly identified as the foundation of engagement, with participants emphasizing that curriculum alone is not sufficient to support attendance.

The summit also highlighted the importance of coordinated, cross-sector collaboration. Schools cannot address the root causes of absenteeism on their own; rather, sustained progress requires shared responsibility among education systems, community organizations, social services, health systems, and families. Youth voices and lived experience were also emphasized as essential to shaping responsive and effective solutions.

Overall, the summit reinforced a shift from viewing attendance as compliance-based to understanding it as an indicator of belonging, wellbeing, and system effectiveness.

Introduction

The purpose of the summit was to bring together diverse perspectives to deepen understanding of student absenteeism and engagement and to identify actionable strategies to strengthen student presence in schools.

The summit explored how absenteeism affects learning, belonging, and wellbeing; what barriers students and families face; and how systems can better respond to these challenges. A further focus was placed on identifying practical, implementable strategies that extend beyond discussion into meaningful action.

The summit recognized that attendance is not simply a measure of student behaviour, but a reflection of whether schools and systems are successfully meeting the needs of students and families.

Summit Overview

The summit followed a structured agenda designed to move from shared learning to applied action. The day opened with a pipe ceremony, followed by remarks from Superintendent Matt Henderson, Minister of Education Tracy Schmidt, University of Winnipeg Dean of Education Dr. Laurie-Ann Hellsten, and Kookum Marsha Missyabit. The opening concluded with a performance by the Good Heart Elk Singers from Tec Voc High School. Kevin Chief delivered the keynote address, setting the tone for the day. A panel discussion featuring students, educators, and community helpers followed, providing diverse perspectives on attendance and engagement. Participants then engaged in breakout sessions with community leaders, educators, researchers, and advocates. The summit concluded with collaborative action labs facilitated by WSD leadership, offering space for participants to reflect, exchange ideas, and identify opportunities for collective action.

The structure of the summit allowed for both high-level reflection and practice-based discussions. Sessions were intentionally designed to elevate lived experience alongside professional and policy perspectives to ensure a balanced and holistic understanding of attendance challenges.

The day concluded with facilitated reflection and commitments to action, emphasizing continued collaboration beyond the event itself.



Keynote Insights

You need to give young people something to run away from and something they can run toward. Don't tell them it's possible- show them.

Kevin Chief, a former Minister of the Legislative Assembly as well as a former WSD student, educator, and University of Winnipeg alumni provided the keynote address. His presentation emphasized the foundational importance of relationships, belonging, and community connection in shaping student engagement. A recurring message was that young people thrive when surrounded by consistent, caring adults who believe in them and actively support their growth.

Chief highlighted that education extends beyond academic instruction. While curriculum is essential, it is insufficient on its own to create engagement. Students must also feel that they belong to a broader community of care, where their presence is noticed, valued, and welcomed. This sense of belonging is often built through small, consistent actions such as greetings from teachers, encouragement from mentors, and opportunities for meaningful participation.

Chief also stressed the importance of exposing students to real-world opportunities. When young people are given access to experiences beyond the classroom such as community learning, mentorship, and post-secondary environments, they are better able to envision future possibilities for themselves. These experiences help bridge the gap between aspiration and opportunity.

Work that can get done in a school system is unprecedented. This is the glue that can solve so many problems, but it can't do it all.

A further key insight was the role of youth as active contributors rather than passive recipients within education systems. Chief emphasized that young people are often highly creative and insightful, and that their perspectives should be meaningfully integrated into decision-making processes.

Our greatest resource is young people. Leverage young people themselves.

Chief's call to action was to take a collective responsibility approach, where families, educators, and communities work together to create conditions that support student success.

Panel Discussion - Lived Experiences: Listening First

Panelists

- **Students**
- **Robyn Boulanger**,
Teacher, Daniel McIntyre
Collegiate Institute
- **Tamara Rondeau**,
Vice-Principal, Daniel
McIntyre Collegiate Institute
- **Cathy Bird**, Caregiver and
Community Member

The lived experience panel provided powerful insights into the factors that influence student attendance from the perspective of students, educators, and caregivers. A central theme was the importance of relationships and belonging in motivating students to attend school. Participants consistently emphasized that students are more likely to engage when they feel genuinely welcomed, respected, and valued by staff and peers.

I ask students one thing that they're interested in and help them explore that. That one simple thing can really change their lives and get them in the building more. I like to say that I'm building a plan with them, not for them. I want them to know that we are equals.

Students described how teacher passion, authentic care, and daily interactions significantly influence their willingness to attend school. Even small gestures, such as being greeted warmly or having informal conversations with staff, were described as meaningful contributors to a sense of belonging.

If I can have the smallest connection with someone, it means I can have the biggest connection with someone.

Representation emerged as a critical factor. Students highlighted the importance of seeing themselves reflected in curriculum, staff, and school environments. When students see their identities and cultures represented, they are more likely to feel included and engaged.

At the same time, participants identified significant barriers to attendance. These included mental health challenges, learning differences, poverty, transportation issues, food insecurity, and fear of judgment or failure. One of the students described feeling defined by grades or feeling that their worth was tied solely to academic performance. Others shared experiences of isolation or lack of support, which negatively affected their engagement.

Parents shouldn't have to juggle putting food on the table or paying for a bus pass.

The panel also emphasized that one negative experience can have lasting impacts on attendance, while one positive and supportive relationship can be transformative.



Breakout Session Insights

1. Policy and Pan-Canadian Research

Panelists

- **Jackie Connell**, Assistant Deputy Minister, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning
- **Sel Burrows**, Community Member
- **Laura Anderson**, Deputy Director, Child and Family Services
- **Matt Henderson**, Superintendent, WSD

This session explored structural and systemic barriers to attendance, particularly those related to housing, transportation, food security, and intergenerational trauma. Participants emphasized that absenteeism cannot be addressed without acknowledging the broader social conditions affecting families.

A key insight was that Indigenous students experience disproportionate barriers due to historical and ongoing systemic inequities. The importance of culturally grounded education, including language and land-based learning, was highlighted as a key factor in improving engagement.

Participants also noted the need for policies that are informed by lived experience and that actively reduce barriers to access rather than unintentionally reinforcing them.

2. Schools as Bridges

Panelists

- **Sari Rosenberg**, Principal, Keewatin Prairie Community School
- **Lindsey Munz & Laura Buller**, Principal and Teacher, Tec Voc High School
- **Jennifer Scott**, Principal, Hugh John Macdonald School
- **Susan Darazsi**, Principal, General Wolfe School
- **Kent Dueck**, Executive Director, Inner City Youth Alive
- **Vern Dano**, WSD Grandfather

This session focused on the role of schools in building belonging and engagement. A central theme was that relationships must be intentionally embedded into school structures so that every student is connected to multiple caring adults.

Participants discussed the importance of shifting from teacher-centred to student-centred approaches, where schools actively consider how students experience their environment. Leadership visibility, relational approaches, and consistent communication with families were identified as key practices that strengthen trust and engagement.

The discussion also emphasized that school spaces themselves matter, but the people within those spaces are the most important factor in determining whether students feel they belong.

3. Multi-Sector & Community Partnerships

Panelists

- **Krista Ringland**, Nurse, Klinik Community Health
- **Kevin Walker**, Executive Director, Bear Clan Patrol
- **Mary Burton**, Executive Director, Zoongizi Ode
- **Jennifer Rattray**, Chief Executive Officer, End Homelessness Winnipeg

This session emphasized that addressing absenteeism requires coordinated action across multiple systems, including education, health, housing, and community organizations. Participants highlighted that many barriers to attendance are rooted in broader structural issues such as poverty, substance use disorders, mental health challenges, and unstable housing.

A key theme was the importance of outreach and relationship-based support. Several of the panelists described meeting youth and families where they are, rather than expecting them to navigate complex systems on their own.

The concept of trust emerged as central. Panelists noted that consistent, caring relationships, often with a single trusted adult, can significantly influence whether students remain connected to school.

The session also highlighted the importance of breaking down silos between organizations and improving communication and coordination across sectors.

A key insight was that absenteeism should be treated as feedback from students and families, signaling where systems are not meeting needs.



Collaborative Action Labs – Breakout Sessions

The breakout sessions were based on the three prominently identified themes heard in the keynote and panel discussions: creating connection, breaking barriers, and enhancing support networks. Across the three sessions, the consistent and reinforcing narrative was that student attendance and engagement are shaped by dynamic interactions between structural barriers, relational conditions, and the strength of coordinated supports. While each session approached the issue from a different lens, there was strong alignment in both the challenges identified and the strategies proposed.

Discussion 1:

Breaking Barriers to Engagement

Participants emphasized that barriers to attendance operate at multiple levels, including individual, family, school, and systems which are often compounded. At the most immediate level, practical challenges such as getting students out of the house, to school safely, and supported throughout the day were identified as persistent obstacles. These are influenced by broader factors including poverty, transportation gaps, food insecurity, unstable home environments, and competing demands on families.

Within schools, structural and cultural barriers also play a significant role. Rigid schedules, outdated policies, and standardized approaches to learning were identified as misaligned with the realities many students face. Participants noted that when systems expect students to adapt to inflexible environments, rather than adapting to student needs, the likelihood of disengagement increases. This misalignment is further exacerbated by gaps in cultural responsiveness, where a lack of representation or accommodation signals exclusion to students and families.

We need to challenge our schools to be more flexible. We are trying to get kids to fit into these rigid systems. How do we mold and change into something that fits them? Schools should be held to task, not just saying it. We often do what is best for the adults, not the kids in the building.

Teacher capacity emerged as another critical internal barrier. The growing expectation for educators to take on relational, extracurricular, and outreach roles, often without adequate time or resources, has contributed to burnout and staff turnover. Participants noted the downstream impact on students, who may interpret staff disengagement or turnover as a lack of care or stability. Some participants shared that when extracurricular activities are accommodated within the regular school day, it reduces pressure on school staff and families to manage additional time and transportation.

It's important to get kids out in the community. Students can be supported to get out during the day to have those connections. This is as important as textbook learning.

Importantly, there was strong agreement that absenteeism should not be interpreted as a lack of motivation. Rather, it is more accurately understood as a symptom of unmet needs and systemic barriers. Reframing absenteeism this way shifts responsibility from the individual student to the broader system.



Discussion 2:

Creating Connection as the Foundation of Engagement



Participants drew a clear distinction between physical presence and meaningful belonging, emphasizing that being in the building does not equate to feeling connected.

| *We cannot confuse contact with connection.*

A key insight was the importance of ensuring that every student is known and supported by at least one caring adult. Simple, consistent interactions such as being greeted without judgment or having a designated space to connect with a trusted adult were described as powerful entry points for engagement, particularly for students who may not yet be ready to participate fully in classroom learning.

Connection was also understood to extend beyond adult-student relationships. Peer relationships, shared activities, and opportunities to engage in areas of personal interest (such as arts, sports, or cultural programming) were identified as critical to building a sense of belonging. These forms of connection create both accountability and motivation, as students feel part of something larger than themselves.

Cultural connection was highlighted as equally important. Participants noted that when schools fail to reflect the identities, values, and lived experiences of students, particularly Indigenous and culturally diverse students, they risk reinforcing exclusion. Conversely, embedding cultural practices, community knowledge, and inclusive representation strengthens both engagement and trust.

Discussions of connection extended across all sessions, where it consistently emerged as the most significant factor influencing student attendance and engagement.



Discussion 3:

Strengthening Support Networks Through Coordination and Outreach

The third area of focus highlighted the importance of coordinated, relationship-based systems of support that extend beyond the school. A central challenge identified was the persistence of silos between schools, community organizations, and service providers. Despite shared commitments, these entities frequently operate in isolation which limits their collective impact.

Participants emphasized that effective support requires intentional collaboration, supported by clear communication pathways and a shared understanding of roles and responsibilities. The idea that “everyone holds a piece of the story” underscored the need for integrated approaches, where information and insights are brought together to form a more complete picture of each student’s circumstances.

Outreach emerged as a critical strategy for bridging gaps between systems and families. Consistent, proactive engagement through home visits, calls, and community presence was identified as essential, particularly for students and families who are hardest to reach. However, participants also acknowledged that outreach is resource-intensive and requires dedicated staffing and sustainable models of support.

Trust was also identified as the foundation of effective support networks. Families may hesitate to engage due to fear of judgment or system involvement, particularly in contexts involving child and family services. As a result, support must be delivered with respect and a commitment to reducing stigma.

Participants also emphasized the importance of designing supports around students and families, rather than expecting them to navigate complex systems. This includes bringing services into schools and communities, increasing access to mental health and social supports, and ensuring that students have consistent access to trusted adults.



Themes

Across the keynote, panel discussions, breakout sessions, and collaborative action labs, several consistent themes emerged:

1.

Belonging as the foundation of attendance.

Student engagement is driven primarily by whether students feel known, valued, and connected within their school communities.

2.

Relationships as the most effective intervention

Consistent, caring relationships with adults and peers are the strongest protective factor against disengagement and absenteeism.

3.

Attendance as a systems issue.

Absenteeism reflects broader structural and social conditions, including poverty, housing instability, transportation barriers, mental health needs, and intergenerational trauma.

4.

The importance of culturally responsive and inclusive environments.

Representation, cultural safety, and relevance in curriculum and school environments significantly influence student connection and participation.

5.

Fragmentation of supports and services.

Silos across education, health, housing, and community systems limit coordinated responses to student needs.

6.

Need for system flexibility and responsiveness.

Rigid policies, schedules, and structures often fail to reflect the lived realities of students and families.

7.

Youth and family voices are essential to change.

Students and families are not passive recipients but critical contributors to identifying challenges and shaping solutions.



Opportunities and Recommendations

1.

Strengthen relational infrastructure in schools.

Ensure every student is intentionally connected to at least one trusted adult, supported by consistent structures for relationship-building.

2.

Integrate student voice into decision-making.

Formalize mechanisms for youth engagement in policy, school design, and program development.

3.

Improve cross-sector coordination.

Develop integrated approaches across education, health, housing, and community services, with shared accountability and communication pathways.

4.

Invest in proactive outreach models.

Expand outreach capacity, including home visits and community-based engagement, particularly for students at highest risk of disengagement.

5.

Increase cultural responsiveness in curriculum and school environments.

Embed Indigenous knowledge, language, and culturally relevant learning approaches across programming and practice.

6.

Address structural barriers directly.

Recognize and respond to housing insecurity, transportation gaps, food insecurity, and poverty as central drivers of absenteeism.

7.

Support educator capacity and wellbeing.

Reorient attendance strategies toward belonging, trust, and engagement rather than enforcement alone.



Calls to Action

Participants identified the following calls to action:

- Prioritize relationships as foundational infrastructure within all school and system design.
- Move from isolated efforts to coordinated, cross-sector collaboration with shared responsibility for outcomes.
- Design systems that adapt to students and families, rather than requiring students to adapt to rigid systems.
- Invest in sustainable outreach and community-based engagement models.
- Embed student and family voice meaningfully in ongoing planning, evaluation, and decision-making.
- Address absenteeism as an indicator of unmet need rather than disengagement or non-compliance.
- Strengthen accountability for creating inclusive, culturally safe, and responsive learning environments.

Reflections and Implications

A key reflection from the summit is that attendance cannot be meaningfully addressed through isolated interventions. Chronic absenteeism is often the result of interconnected social, relational, and systemic factors which require coordinated and sustained responses.

The discussions highlighted a critical shift in framing: from viewing absenteeism as an individual issue to understanding it as feedback from students and families about system accessibility, responsiveness, and relevance.

There is a clear implication that schools alone cannot solve attendance challenges. While schools remain central points of connection, broader social determinants must be addressed through integrated, cross-sector action.

The summit also highlighted how small, consistent relational actions can have disproportionate impact. Simple practices, such as recognition, greeting, and sustained adult presence are foundational to student engagement.

Finally, the importance of trust emerged as a core condition for change. Without trust between students, families, schools, and systems, even well-designed interventions will have limited impact.



Conclusion

The summit reinforced a shared understanding that student attendance is fundamentally rooted in belonging, relationships, and broader social conditions. While schools play a critical role, they operate within a wider ecosystem that must also be engaged to support meaningful change.

A consistent message throughout the day was that young people are not only recipients of services but active contributors to solutions. Their experiences, insights, and leadership are essential to shaping responsive and effective systems.

Moving forward, sustained progress will require coordinated action across sectors, a commitment to flexibility and responsiveness, and a continued focus on building trust and connection. The summit concluded with a collective recognition that improving attendance is not a single initiative, but an ongoing, shared responsibility upheld by care, collaboration, and a commitment to student wellbeing and success.





WINNIPEG SCHOOL DIVISION