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Summative Research Report on the Learning Through the Arts Youth Empowerment Program in Wood Buffalo Region, Alberta 2010 to 2013

Submitted to the Government of Alberta

Submitted by Learning Through the Arts, The Royal Conservatory

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LEARNING THROUGH
THE ARTS

This report contains an overview of findings coming out of three years of impact assessment research conducted into The Youth Empowerment Program as it was implemented in the Wood Buffalo Region of Alberta, Canada from 2010 to 2013. The Youth Empowerment Program is an ongoing initiative of Learning Through the Arts of the Royal Conservatory of Music, and its implementation in the Wood Buffalo Region was made possible in large part to funding received from the Government of Alberta's Safe Communities Innovation Fund.

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Introduction

Alberta Justice's Safe Communities Innovation Fund (SCIF) supported the implementation of the Learning Through the Arts (LTTA) Youth Empowerment Program (YEP) in the Wood Buffalo Region of northern Alberta from 2010 to 2013. This summative research report provides an overview of the growth and cumulative effects of YEP over the three years for which it was implemented with the support of SCIF. The findings relate to the following impact objectives:

- Promoting student academic achievement
- Increasing student engagement in learning
- Supporting differentiated instruction in the classroom
- Stimulating student preferences for arts-based learning
- Fostering students' desire for school arts experiences
- Promoting school attendance by students
- Enhancing inter-cultural understanding among students
- Promoting knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) cultures and the well-being of FNMI youth
- Developing Artist-Educator/Teacher relations
- Creating a roster of regional Artist-Educators

About YEP

LTTA's Youth Empowerment Program aims to empower youth, particularly those aged 12 to 16 years, to be successful in school and society through engagement in arts-based learning that:

- Fosters enhanced school attachment and achievement
- Cultivates self-esteem and positive cultural identity
- Encourages pro-social activity
- Builds creativity and resilience

LTTA brings specially-trained dramatic artists, musicians, visual artists, dancers, and writers to work creatively with teachers and community program coordinators to engage youth deeply in their school learning and stimulate life skills development through out-of-school activities. One of the largest arts-based learning programs in the world, LTTA has nearly 20 years of experience in developing and delivering regionally-responsive programming that reflects the context and needs of identified communities across Canada and around the world.

Past LTTA Programming in the Wood Buffalo Region

Prior to the commencement of YEP in the Wood Buffalo Region in 2010, LTTA had already sustained a two-year presence in the Fort McMurray Catholic School District (FMCS/D/Catholic Board) with pilot programming supported by provincial education funding. This pilot programming involved elementary school students and teachers in Kindergarten to Grade 8. LTTA-initiated research into the pilot programming showed many positive effects for students and teachers alike, related to those objectives listed directly above. Consequently, the Catholic Board welcomed the opportunity to extend its relationship with LTTA and YEP and, therefore, to participate in the SCIF programming.

The Need for YEP in the Wood Buffalo Region

YEP programming was customized to the needs of the Wood Buffalo Region through a lengthy consultations process involving regional youth and other community members. As such, it was specifically designed to fit well with Alberta's *Crime Prevention Framework*¹, which emphasizes community collaborations, identification of underlying factors contributing to youth delinquency, and the development of protective innovations for youth that help reduce risk factors.

While not all students involved in YEP in the Wood Buffalo Region from 2010 to 2013 would officially be considered "at-risk," there were other factors at play that would benefit from an arts-based intervention like YEP. For example, learning disengagement in school has been rapidly becoming a major problem in contemporary education, suggesting that traditional teaching methods are no longer proving effective and engaging instruction for all learners. In addition, students transitioning to high school, as well as those already in high school, face the challenge of learning in a world that places many social and economic pressures on them (Korn, 1994).² The social and economic configuration of Fort McMurray as a modern-day boomtown poses particular challenges for all of its inhabitants, but especially for regional youth (O'Connor, 2011).³ YEP was planned to address as many of these regional challenges as possible.

¹ Government of Alberta. *Alberta's Crime Prevention Framework*.

² Korn, M. (1994). *An arts and education needs and assessment of Metropolitan Toronto*. Toronto, ON: The Royal Conservatory of Music.

³ O'Connor, C. (2011). *Young people in Fort McMurray: An examination of youth transitions in Canada's northern boomtown*. Department of Sociology & Anthropology Mount Royal University.

Defining the Focus of YEP in the Wood Buffalo Region

Part of the Year 1 research tasks was to conduct a needs assessment that would be fundamental to determining what kind of programming YEP should provide in the Wood Buffalo Region. The needs assessment research focused on answering the following questions:

1. What are the factors that put all youth in the Wood Buffalo Region at risk of engagement in anti-social behaviours, especially First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) youth?
2. What are the potential protective influences that could be derived from arts-based programming for regional youth?

The Year 1 (2010-2011) research process began with in-depth interviews with 25 community members and a professionally facilitated strategic planning retreat for both community leaders and FNMI youth representatives.⁴

The consultations revealed widespread enthusiasm for YEP and provided a clearer understanding of many of the major challenges facing regional youth that put them at risk of engaging in anti-social activity:

- Lack of supervision during out-of-school hours because of long work shifts for parents/guardians
- Economic disparities
- Lack of opportunities for extra-curricular activities, especially in the arts
- Lack of safe gathering places
- Altercations between groups of youth
- Involvement with drugs and alcohol
- Cultural enclaves

The research delineated additional challenges for FNMI learners: entering school with under-developed language skills; contending with external and internalized racism; encountering teaching styles that are not in line with traditional ways of FNMI learning; and addressing feelings of displacement when required to move from their homes to Fort McMurray to attend high school.

The Year 1 research also provided a literature review into the known effects of arts-based teaching and learning, as well as into the existing research literature concerning the proven efficacy of arts-based teaching for FNMI learners.

⁴ Retreat participants included individuals from the Fort McMurray Public and Catholic School Boards, educators from the Athabasca Tribal Council, LTTA Artist-Educators, lead LTTA personnel from across Canada, and two Aboriginal youth representatives from the Wood Buffalo Region.

As a direct result of the community consultations and literature reviews, LTTA leaders developed a list of actions that could have a protective impact on the lives of youth in the Wood Buffalo Region. These included:

1. Provide arts-based school programs that merge the arts with other, non-arts school subjects in order to promote differentiated learning that meets a wide variety of learner backgrounds, capacities, and preferences.
2. Promote school and social success of FNMI students through arts-based programming that suits FNMI learning styles and values, and that promotes cultural pride and self-worth.
3. Provide arts-based, structured, after-school, weekend, and/or summer activities for Wood Buffalo youth to encourage positive pro-social interactions among the wider youth community.
4. Provide programming that crosses cultural and ethnic lines to help diminish the divisiveness and polarization of cultural groups that eventually results in stereotyping, bullying, and the formation of gangs.
5. Make programming easily accessible.

While it would involve participation of youth from all sectors of society within the Wood Buffalo Region, YEP had a particular focus on programming that promoted the academic and social success of FNMI youth. However, in community consultations with FNMI youth and FNMI community leaders, it was made clear that FNMI youth did not wish to be segregated, but rather, to engage in activities that were inclusive of youth of all nationalities and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, while YEP programming was created specifically to address the needs of FNMI youth during the three years of implementation under SCIF support, the majority of programming was inclusive.

The Reach of YEP in the Wood Buffalo Region

During Year 1, the pilot year of YEP in the region (2010-2011), programming focused largely on recruiting and training local artists to become LTTA YEP Artist-Educators, providing orientation for teachers and community members, and piloting programs in and out of school. In Year 1, approximately 1,000 youth and 34 teachers were involved in YEP in-school and community programming in Fort McMurray. There were 25 LTTA YEP Artist-Educators on the roster, some of whom were ready to go into schools and community settings, and some of whom were in the training stages.

During Year 2 (2011-2012), LTTA launched a more robust YEP programming mix in school and community settings in Fort McMurray, Fort McKay, Conklin, and Fort Chipewyan, delivering YEP to over 2,080 youth in Grades 7, 8, and 9. Those youth participated primarily in the in-school program, with some participating in the after-school programming and summer camps.

In Year 3 (2012-2013), YEP continued to serve young people in Fort McMurray, Fort McKay, Conklin, and Fort Chipewyan with expanded offerings to over 4,000 youth in in-school, after-school, and summer camp programming. One hundred and thirty teachers also participated. Twenty-one LTTA YEP Artist-Educators provided the programming.

Research Methodology

The research was designed to inform the development of YEP from year to year by gathering feedback from school and community program participants about their emerging needs. Perhaps more importantly, the research also assessed the cumulative impacts and effects of YEP on students/youth and their teachers from the beginning of Year 1 to the end of Year 3.

For all three years of YEP, data were gathered through combinations of interviews, questionnaires, focus group discussions, school board documentation, and observations. Both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered. Qualitative data were analysed primarily for emerging themes and patterns. Quantitative data were analysed for frequencies of responses and, in Year 3 (2012-2013), for statistically significant changes in responses to the same questions posed by the researchers prior to and at the end of each year's programming.

Comparison of the scores of Catholic Board YEP students on provincial achievement tests (PATs) in the subject areas to which YEP was applied were also calculated, taking the spring 2010 scores (the spring before YEP began in the region) as a baseline and comparing them to the spring 2013 scores. In Year 3, in addition to Grade 7, 8, and 9, LTTA provided programming for Grade 6 students in the Catholic Board. This programming was designated "Core" in order to distinguish it from the YEP programming offered to Grades 7 to 9. The Core programming was important in its own right for Grade 6 students and their teachers, but also laid the groundwork for future participation in YEP.

Although the Fort McMurray Public School District (FMPSD/Public Board) participated in YEP during the 2012-2013 school year (Year 3), they were not part of the longitudinal study of the effects of YEP on PAT scores. Therefore, data from only questionnaire, interview, and student focus group are combined with other data sources in this report.

Research Findings

In this section of this report, we provide a summary of important findings in the YEP research conducted in the Wood Buffalo Region for the entire 2010 to 2013 study period. These findings have been grouped by impact objective, as listed on page 4.

Statistical results are provided by year in brackets following a more general statement of findings. Because the research questions were refined, changed, and/or added to over the three years – in order to reflect emerging questions and needs – statistics for some findings cannot be provided for all three years. It is also important to realize that, in the rare cases where positive responses on any research items decline over the three years, those findings do not necessarily reflect declines in positive impacts for the overall program. Rather, those findings are more likely to indicate that a new aspect of programming has been introduced: it often takes several months or years for participants to "find their feet" when changing from long-held practices and beliefs to new ones. Unless otherwise stated, bracketed statistics were derived from participant questionnaire responses.

Promoting Student Academic Achievement

One of the central aims of YEP is to foster academic success for learners so that they are encouraged to stay in school and consequently have better access to post-secondary education and employment opportunities. Across Canada there is concern about the high school dropout rate, especially of FNMI students. Therefore, while promoting the academic success of all students in participating Wood Buffalo Region schools was of concern to YEP, the learning success of regional FNMI students (with the attendant boosts to self-confidence and hope) were of special concern. In fact, the research has shown that YEP has, indeed, had a positive effect on the academic performance of both FNMI and non-FNMI students.

Throughout the three years of programming, Wood Buffalo Region teachers increasingly attested to the fact that student achievement in the subject areas to which YEP had been applied, (Language Arts, Social Studies, and, in Year 3, Mathematics), had been positively impacted by the program (Year 1: a theme in teacher interviews; Year 2: 64% of questionnaire respondents; Year 3: 86% of questionnaire respondents).

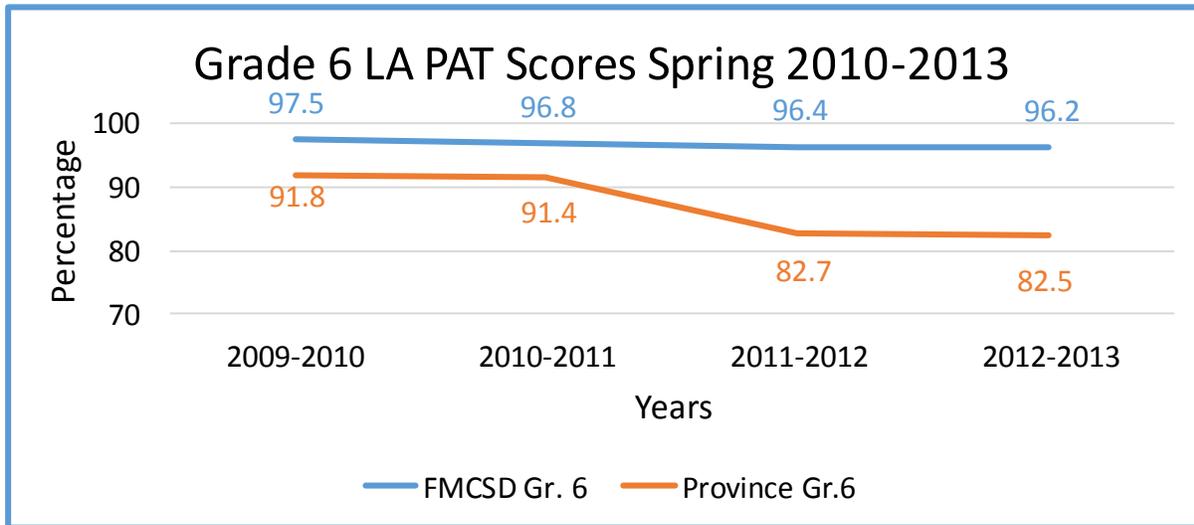
One statistical indicator of successful learning was YEP students' performance on the yearly PATs, as compared to the performance of their provincial peers. In Alberta, PATs are administered to students in Grades 3, 6, and 9. It became part of the research program to examine the Grade 6 and 9 PAT scores for the Catholic Board. Impressive gains were observed on the spring 2013 PATs for students in the Catholic Board, reflecting a cumulative effect of YEP for the Grade 9 students in the Catholic Board who had participated in all three years of programming.

Grade 6 PAT Scores

Language Arts

Despite a decline in Grade 6 Language Arts scores across the province, the 2013 average PAT score of Grade 6 students in the Catholic Board continued to be higher than the provincial average: the 2012 and 2013 averages for Catholic Board Grade 6 students were **13.7% above the provincial average**, which represent the most substantial positive differences over the previous six years. Comparison of the spring 2010 (baseline) scores for all students to the 2013 scores showed that, over the three years of YEP, the Grade 6 Language Arts PAT scores held very constant while provincial averages dropped. (See Chart 1 on the next page.)

Chart 1: Catholic Board Grade 6 student scores on the Language Arts PATs, 2010-2013



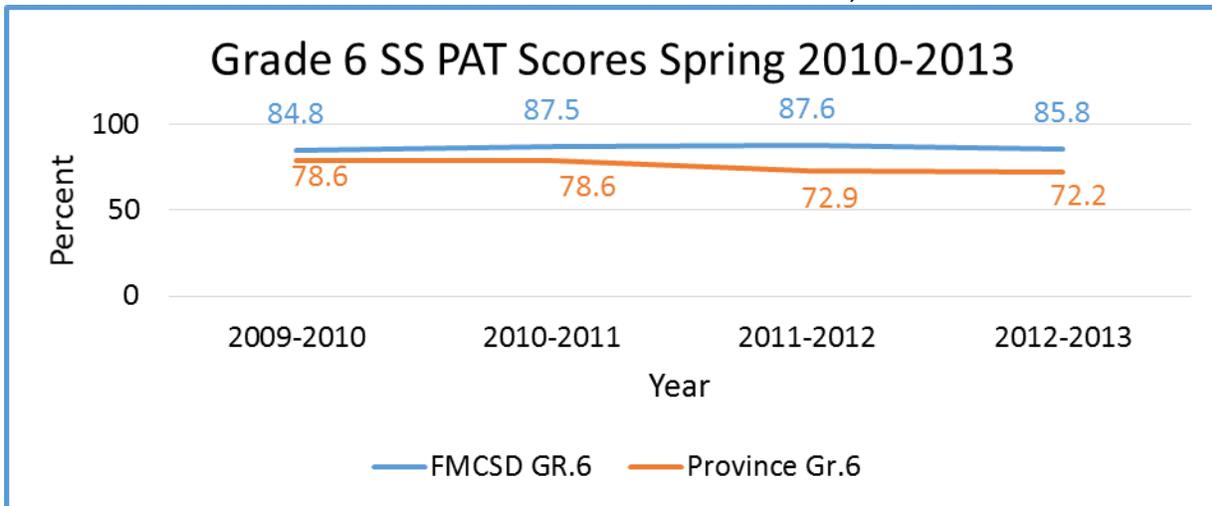
Source: Grade 6 Language Arts Achievement Tests Results 2012 & 2013; Grade 6 Language Arts Achievement Tests, Multi-Year Report, 2007-2011.

An even more notable result is that **Grade 6 FNMI students** in the Catholic Board achieved what the Alberta Government⁵ described as an **excellent** score in their 2013 Language Arts PAT. Here, the Catholic Board FNMI average (91.7%) was **23.4 percentage points above the provincial average for FNMI students**.

Social Studies

FMCS D Grade 6 student average (85.8%) on the 2013 Social Studies PAT was **13.6 percentage points above the provincial average (72.2%) for all Grade 6 students in Alberta**. Chart 2 shows the comparison between Catholic Board and provincial averages since spring 2010.

Chart 2: Catholic Board Grade 6 student scores on PATs in Social Studies, 2010-2013



Source: Grade 6 Social Studies Achievement Tests Results 2012 & 2013; Grade 6 Social Studies Achievement Tests, Multi-Year Report, 2007-2011.

⁵ Alberta Government (2013). *Student Learning Achievement, Grades K-9*.

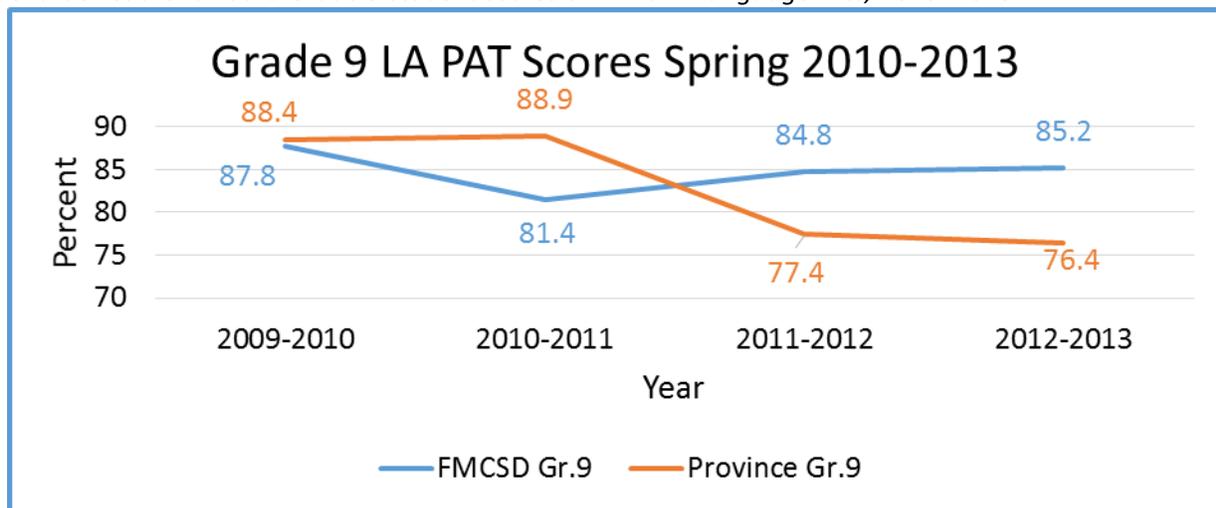
In spring 2013, Grade 6 FNMI students in the Catholic Board achieved a score (72.9%) that was **22.7 percentage points above the provincial average of other FNMI students in the province (50.2%)** in the Grade 6 Social Studies PAT. The average scores for the past three years had also been above the provincial average, which may reflect the fact that for the past three years Grade 6 students in the Catholic Board had taken part in LTTA Social Studies programming funded from education sources. **The FMCS D FNMI 2013 score (72.9%) was also .7% above the provincial average for students of all backgrounds (72.2%).**

Grade 9 PAT Scores

Language Arts

As can be seen in Chart 3, the Catholic Board’s Grade 9 student average (85.2%) for all students on the 2013 PAT for Language Arts **surpassed the provincial average (76.4%) by 8.8 percentage points, the highest positive difference for at least seven years.**

Chart 3: Catholic Board Grade 9 student scores on PATs in Language Arts, 2010- 2013



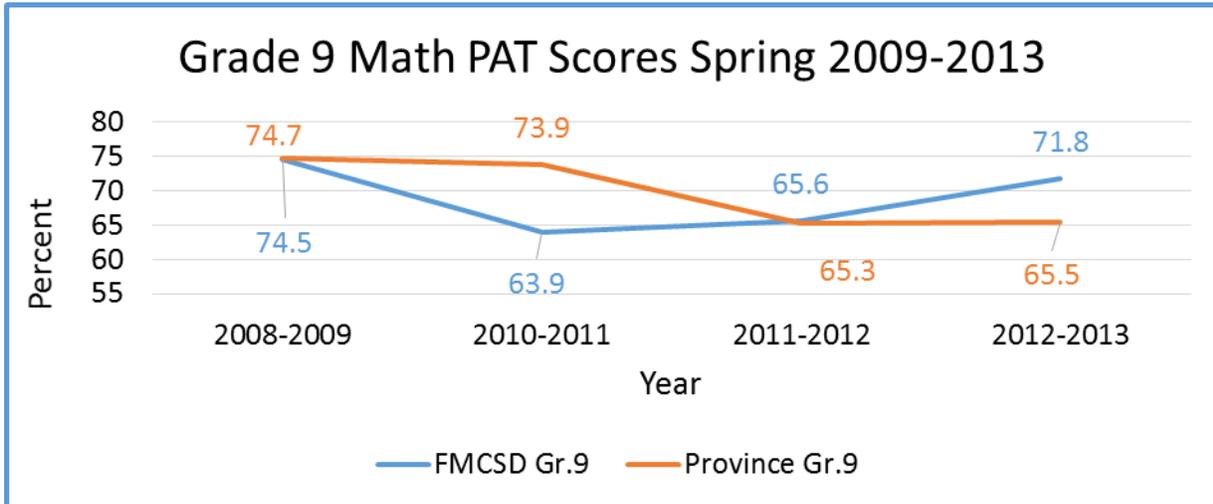
Source: Grade 9 Language Arts Achievement Tests Results 2012 & 2013; Grade 9 Language Arts Achievement Tests, Multi-Year Report, 2007-2011.

The average score for Grade 9 FNMI students in the Catholic Board (79%) on the Language Arts PAT was **20.5% above the average (58.5%) for other FMNI students in the province. The FMCS D FNMI students also surpassed the provincial average for students of ALL backgrounds (76.4%) by 2.6%.**

Mathematics

FMCS D Scores on the 2013 PAT for Grade 9 Mathematics (all students) showed that the average grade for the Catholic Board students (71.8%) **surpassed the provincial average (65.5%) by 6.3%**. (Chart 4). There were no mathematics scores reported by the province for the 2009-2010 school year. Therefore, the spring 2009 scores were taken as a baseline.

Chart 4: Catholic Board Grade 9 student scores on PATs in Mathematics, 2009-2013



Source: Grade 9 Mathematics Achievement Tests Results 2012 & 2013; Grade 9 Mathematics Achievement Tests, Multi-Year Report, 2007-2011.

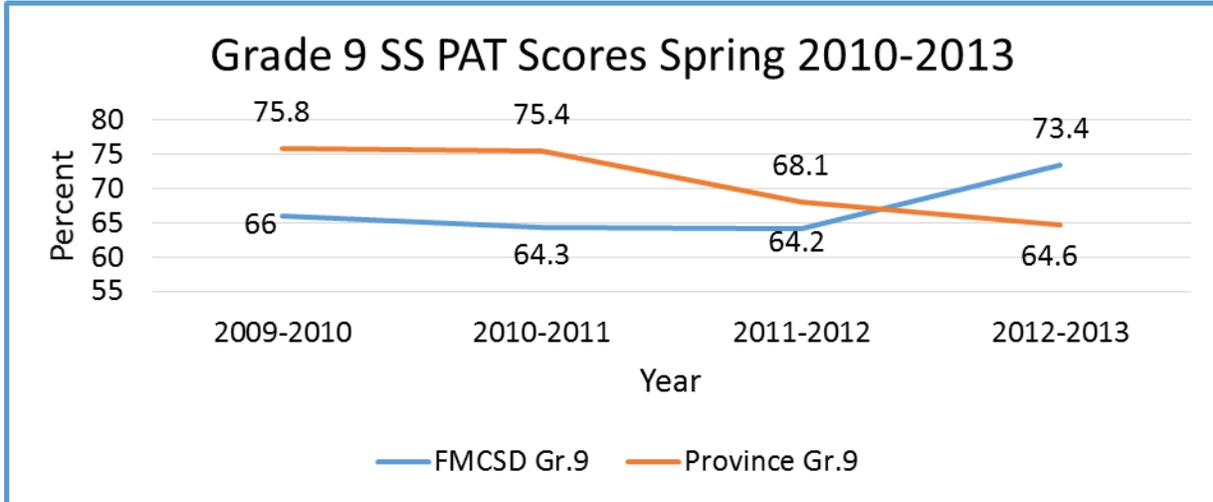
The Alberta Government⁶ described the performance of the Catholic Board’s Grade 9 FNMI students on the 2013 Mathematics PAT as **improved significantly**: the Catholic Board students (66.1%) scored **23.3% above the provincial average for other FNMI students (42.8%)**. **What is even more encouraging is the fact that the FMCS D FNMI students scored almost 1% above the provincial average for students of all backgrounds.**

⁶ Alberta Government (2013). Student Learning Achievement, Grades K-9

Social Studies

On the 2013 PAT for Social Studies, the Catholic Board students (73.4%) **achieved 8.8 percentage points above the provincial average, exceeding the provincial average (64.6%) for the first time in years** (Chart 5):

Chart 5: Catholic Board Grade 9 Scores on the Provincial Achievement Tests in Social Studies, 2012 & 2013



Source: *Grade 9 Social Studies Achievement Tests Results 2012 & 2013*; *Grade 9 Social Studies Achievement Tests, Multi-Year Report, 2007-2011*.

The Catholic Board’s FNMI students (62.9%) scored **19.2% above the average for other FNMI students in the province** (43.7%). This score marked an increase of 14.4% over the average scores of the board’s FNMI students on Social Studies PATs for the previous three years and was only 1.7% lower than the provincial average for ALL students.

Based on the PAT results, it is very apparent that YEP contributed the academic gains of participating students in the Catholic Board.

Increasing Student Engagement in Learning

Student academic success is promoted through engagement in the learning process. Across all three years of programming, teachers reported enhanced student engagement in their learning during the YEP classes (Year 1: reported by 100% of teachers; Year 2: 86%; Year 3: 93%).

Teachers also indicated that the YEP classes engaged students who were not normally engaged by the school subjects to which YEP was applied (e.g., Year 2: reported by 91% of teachers; Year 3: 93%).

In Year 3, teachers were asked directly if they thought the YEP arts-based approach to learning made school subjects “come alive” for students: 97% of the teachers replied, “Yes.”

In focus group discussions and questionnaire responses, students in all three years of programming identified the factors that made arts-based learning in the YEP classes appealing:

- The emphasis on experiential learning
- The room for individual choice and expression in learning tasks
- The fact that there is no “one right way” to approach or answer a learning question
- Group collaboration leading to the development of inter-cultural understanding, an appreciation for the varied talents of their classmates, and the development of social skills
- Learning tasks that were fun, largely self-directed, and geared to individual learning styles and capacities.

Perhaps one of the greatest strengths of YEP in the Wood Buffalo Region was related to this last point –the tailoring of learning experiences to suit a variety of learner needs and preferences. In other words, YEP provided differentiated instruction that was well embraced by learners.

Supporting Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction is defined as being student-centred and designed to provide a variety of learning tasks suitable to addressing the wide range of learner abilities, preferences, and developmental stages that are present in all classrooms. Differentiated instruction has become a key concept in contemporary education, evidence of growing recognition that: 1) individuals have preferred learning needs that, when accommodated, lead to learning success and 2) the contemporary classroom is increasingly populated by students of different cultural, linguistic, and/or national backgrounds. These students need varied means to approach and express their learning. Arts-based learning is by its very nature differentiated because it allows students choices as to how they approach and express their learning.

School Boards in the Wood Buffalo Region place great value on differentiated instruction for all of their students. They also recognize that differentiated instruction allows learners from indigenous regional populations, as well as those from families who have been drawn from a diverse range of socio-cultural backgrounds to work in the region, the opportunity to express their learning in ways that they find accessible, culturally relevant, and meaningful.

Over the three years of programming, teachers reported that YEP enabled them to provide arts-based differentiated instruction to students in the subject areas to which YEP was applied (e.g., Year 1: reported by 100% of teachers; Year 2: 100%; Year 3: 92%).

As the program progressed, teachers also reported that by working alongside an LTTA YEP Artist-Educators they had developed their capacities to independently provide arts-based differentiated teaching in other non-arts subject areas (Year 2: reported by 100% of teachers; Year 3: 83% of respondents to the teacher questionnaire). Therefore, YEP proved itself to be a successful differentiated instruction method that met both teacher and student needs, fulfilling a critical school board improvement objective.

Stimulating Student Preferences for Arts-Based Learning

There was strong evidence across the three years that many YEP students preferred to learn school subjects through the arts as opposed to more traditional ways of learning (Year 1: reported by 55% of students; Year 2: 75%; Year 3: 65%).

In Year 3 of programming, a special application of three nested studies in the areas of Language Arts, Social Studies, and Mathematics were used to examine more closely the effects of YEP on student learning in those subject areas. The research showed that there were statistically significant gains in the number of students who liked those school subjects after having participated in YEP during the school year. There were also statistically significant gains in students' overall enjoyment of all of the art forms used in YEP (e.g., acting, sculpting, video-making, painting, drawing, dancing, and music).

Of particular interest was a special YEP Mathematics project in Year 3. There are few reports in the research literature of the use of the arts to teach Mathematics. Mathematics and the arts are sometimes thought to be at opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of content – mathematical knowledge being seen as much more concrete and objective, while the knowledge that one usually derives from the arts perceived as being more subjective. This perception can create barriers to implementing a program like LTTA's YEP in "hard" subjects like mathematics and science. However, by the end of the Year 3 YEP Mathematics project, 70% of participating students reported that they preferred to learn that subject through the arts. The positive Grade 9 scores on the Mathematics PATs (mentioned above) also attest to the success of the programming.

Fostering Students' Desire for School Arts Experiences

When YEP began in 2010, there were few opportunities for the majority of regional youth to engage in school or community-based arts experiences. At the end of each year of YEP, participating students in Grades 7, 8, and 9 were asked if they thought it was important for students at their grade levels to have in-school arts experiences. Student responses indicated a growing appreciation for those experiences across the three years of programming. (Year 1: reported by 57% of students; Year 2: 76%; Year 3: statistically significant increase over the school year).

Promoting School Attendance

Students who enjoy school typically attend more frequently. When asked in Year 2 and 3 if YEP had positively impacted student attendance, teachers answered in the affirmative. In Year 3, a special effort was made to track student attendance in a sample of students participating in YEP Language Arts, Social Studies and Mathematics studies.

Language Arts Study Attendance

Attendance records for classes participating in the special Language Arts study classes were collected in spring 2013 and compared to attendance rates for the same students for the month prior to the YEP programming. The average attendance rate for the YEP classes (90%) was 1% higher than for the non-YEP classes (89%). FNMI students' average attendance rates for both the YEP and non-YEP classes held steady at 85%.

It is not surprising that there were not more striking gains in attendance for the YEP classes, given that the majority of participating YEP classes were in Grades 7 and 8, where attendance was mandated. For the participating Grade 9 students there were no differences between the average attendance for the month when YEP was offered and for the month prior to that programming: attendance held steady at 86%.

Mathematics Study Attendance

In the case of the YEP Mathematics classes, attendance records for the fall LTTA YEP programming were collected and compared to a control group of students who did not receive the arts-based programming. Attendance rates for the arts-based Mathematics classes fared much better with an average of 96% as compared to 85% for the control group classes.

Attendance records for the spring LTTA YEP Mathematics programming were collected and compared with the attendance rates of the same students in the month prior to the LTTA YEP special study Mathematics classes. The average attendance scores for the YEP classes (92%) were 1% higher than for the non-YEP classes (91%). FNMI students' average attendance rates for both the YEP and non-YEP classes held steady at 89%.

Again, it is not surprising that there were not more striking gains in attendance for the spring YEP classes, given that the majority of participating classes were in Grades 7 and 8, where attendance was mandated.

The overall high attendance rates for the spring Mathematics classes may have to do with the fact that students in those classes had been introduced to an arts-based approach to Mathematics in Fall 2012 and therefore may have gained an appreciation for Mathematics.

Social Studies Study Attendance

Attendance records for the classes in the Social Studies study were collected and compared with the attendance rates of the same students in the month prior to the LTTA YEP classes. The average attendance for all students in all of the classes participating in the Social Studies study held steady at about 90% for both the YEP and comparison classes. When the attendance records were separated out for FNMI students, there was no difference in their attendance at YEP classes and at the comparison classes. The average attendance rate held steady at about 85%. Again, most of the student participants were in Grade 7 and 8, where attendance was mandated.

Enhancing Inter-cultural Understanding among Students

In the Year 1 community consultations, community participants informed the research team that many cultural groups in the Wood Buffalo Region tend to “keep to their own” for social interactions, thus creating cultural enclaves in the city and region. Interviewees spoke of the need to avoid the formation result from this enclave style of socialization, and to promote inter-cultural understanding among youth through shared activities.

Across the three years of YEP, teachers consistently reported that the program’s emphasis on both individual expression and collaborative exploration of subject matter led to greater collegiality in general among their students and better inter-cultural understanding among the various cultural groups in their classes. As a result, inter-cultural understanding and acceptance were perceived to have increased (Years 1 & 2: a dominant theme in teacher interviews; Year 3: 85% of respondents to the teacher questionnaire).

Promoting Knowledge about FNMI Cultures and the Well-Being of FNMI Youth

In the Year 1 needs assessment research, the research team learned that FNMI students in the region often felt excluded by the school curriculum, suffered from external and internalized racism, and felt displaced when they were required to move to Fort McMurray to attend high school. It was one of the main regional goals of YEP to foster self-esteem and cultural pride, as well academic and social success, for FNMI youth. Therefore, YEP took a number of measures to ensure that FNMI students saw themselves reflected more often in the school curriculum and felt free to express their own experiences in the arts-based learning projects, thereby promoting a sense of belonging, as well as the academic success that was evident in the FNMI PAT scores reported above.

Throughout the three years of programming, wherever appropriate, YEP Artist-Educators used Aboriginal art forms in their teaching. In Year 2, YEP also introduced its Elder-in-Residence program where an FNMI Elder worked alongside LTTA’s YEP Artist-Educators, sharing her stories and cultural traditions with youth in Grades 7, 8, and 9.

The Elder’s stories and related activities were used as a springboard for the programming delivered in subsequent classroom sessions tied to Social Studies and Language Arts curricula. The inclusion of FNMI content in the Social Studies curriculum was particularly important, as the Year 1 research had revealed that regional FNMI students listed Social Studies as among their least favourite school subjects because they did not see themselves or their experiences reflected in the curriculum content.

In Year 3, more Elders joined the very successful program, and classroom visits were extended to more teachers and students. One Social Studies teacher commented on the positive effects of an Elder’s visit, saying that having the Elder in the classroom was “a great, authentic way to have a conversation on FNMI history in Canada” (Year 3 Teacher Interview).

Where school populations were composed solely of FNMI students, as in the case of Conklin Community School where the whole student body was Métis, YEP provided programming that was solely culturally-based. In Conklin, the fiddling program *Strings Across the Sky* was introduced school-wide in order to help students understand and partake in their cultural tradition of

fiddling. The results were profound for both the school and the community: students reported new feelings of cultural pride and self-esteem, while families, who were traditionally distrustful of the formal schooling system, entered through the doors of the school to attend the end-of-programming concert and to be thrilled by their children's accomplishments.⁷

Over the three years of YEP, teachers in the Wood Buffalo Region reported that the inclusion of FNMI art forms and the visits from the Elder-in-Residence had increased their own knowledge of FNMI cultures (Year 1: reported by 65% of teachers; Year 2: 70%; Year 3: 85%), resulting in more inclusion of FNMI content in their own teaching.

Across the three years of programming, FNMI and non-FNMI students alike attributed growth in their knowledge of FNMI cultures and histories to YEP (focus group discussions). FNMI students reported specifically that the YEP classes connected them with their spiritual and cultural traditions. Non-FNMI students also exhibited growing empathy when speaking about the histories of FNMI peoples in Canada.

The YEP community programming also played a central role in promoting inter-cultural knowledge and acceptance. LTTA YEP Artist-Educators worked in two kinds of community programming in Year 1: the already-established Full Circle Mentoring Program for FNMI children and youth, and summer camps offered at McDonald Island Park, Fort McMurray, and Fort Chipewyan. In the Full Circle Mentoring Program for FNMI children and youth, LTTA YEP Artist-Educators provided mentorship and arts-based programming, while showing FNMI teen mentors how to lead arts-based activities.

In Years 2 and 3, after-school programming was expanded to Fort McKay (all FNMI participants) and three sites within Fort McMurray (largely FNMI participants, with other cultural groups). In Fort McMurray, after-school programming was offered in high schools in order to be convenient and accessible to youth immediately after school. In the much smaller community of Fort McKay, the programming took place at the local youth centre, which was within walking distance for participating youth.

Across the years, participating youth continued to ask for expanded programming, identifying the many benefits that accrued to them as FNMI and non-FNMI youth. For example, Year 3 youth respondents to the YEP after-school program questionnaire identified the following gains from their experiences:

⁷ The distrust of the schools can be traced to the multigenerational effects of the residential school system in Canada. See Patteson, A., Restoule, J.-P., Margolin, I., and deLeon, C. (2010). *Arts-based teaching as an alternative approach for Aboriginal learners and their teachers*. A study commissioned by the Canadian Council of Learning.

- More self-confidence
- Increased knowledge of FNMI cultures
- Greater ability to pay attention and focus on learning projects
- Greater capacities/skills to be group leaders
- Enhanced ability to trust and share
- More knowledge of how to work well with others
- Greater ability to express themselves through various art forms (e.g., dance, digital photography, and acting)
- Increased capacity to have fun

Additional student comments indicated that the attendees at the after-school programming learned that everyone has his/her own talents and that the after-school groups didn't "judge you for being yourself."

Clearly the after-school programming provided the opportunity to find a safe place to be, where youth acquired life skills while learning how to express themselves through artistic media. Additionally, since the after-school hours are known to be a time when unsupervised youth are frequently lured into anti-social activities, this programming made an important community contribution by channeling the energies of participating youth into pro-social activities.

YEP summer camps were also positive forces in integrating youth of various cultural groups and promoting well-being for FNMI youth in particular. For example, in Year 2, LTTA Artist-Educators at the MacDonald Island Park and Fort Chipewyan camps reported that the youth who attended the summer camps were drawn from varied cultural groups and that one of the great benefits of the camps was the bridges that were built between those groups. In Year 3, the LTTA Artist-Educators identified the benefits of the camp experiences to participants as follows:

- Building positive relationships with leaders and peers
- Learning to respect one another
- Participating in planned, enjoyable activities during the summer months
- Learning new, memorable arts skills
- Developing self-confidence and trust
- Having creative experiences that they will remember for a life-time
- Having fun

In addition, across all three years of YEP, FNMI youth were chosen to help facilitate the summer camps, thereby helping them acquire leadership skills.

Developing Artist-Educator/Teacher Relations

The success of any LTTA program depends greatly on the nature of the teacher-artist relationship. While the teacher is the curriculum expert and classroom leader, the Artist-Educator is a specially-trained arts professional and arts-based learning expert. Effective YEP classes are based on the successful sharing and pairing of these two sets of knowledge and expertise.

In the early days of LTTA programming, many teachers typically do not seek to take a very active role in providing arts-based teaching alongside the Artist-Educators. However, it is equally typical that teacher-artist teams become stronger as the program progresses. This was also the case in the Wood Buffalo Region.

By the end of Year 2 of YEP, 71% of the teachers interviewed indicated that they had come to realize that the program was most productive if the teacher and the Artist-Educator worked as a team in the classroom. The teachers also realized that they should not hesitate to offer timely guidance to the Artist-Educator about curriculum content and how to approach any particular group of students. By Year 3 of YEP, the logistics of teacher-artist planning sessions and team-teaching had been fine-tuned.

Teacher praise for the LTTA Artist-Educators remained high over the three years of programming. The comments teachers made in Year 2 are provided here as examples:

- 92% of the teachers reported that the LTTA YEP Artist-Educators displayed good knowledge of the curriculum areas to which the arts were applied in the YEP classes.
- 80% of teachers indicated that the LTTA YEP Artist-Educators provided them with good quality lesson plans.
- 80% of teachers reported that the LTTA YEP Artist-Educators possessed strong ability to tie the arts activities to the non-arts curriculum content.
- 70% of teachers reported that the lesson planning process with the LTTA YEP Artist-Educators worked well.

This consolidation of teacher-artist relationships relied on a number of factors, chief among them being the close working relationships among schools, school board personnel, and the YEP leadership, all of whom communicated regularly, were quick to address issues, and to provide both teacher and artist training that helped both groups to develop confidence and competency in arts-based instruction.

Creating a Roster of Regional Artist-Educators

LTTA YEP Artist-Educators are professional artists drawn from the regions in which they live and work, and who are specially-trained by LTTA for their YEP school and community roles. By hiring regional artists for YEP, LTTA contributed to the livelihood of the artists, helped raise the profile of regional arts, and ensured that YEP was delivered by individuals who possessed a knowledge of life in the Wood Buffalo Region and of the needs of regional youth.

Because training Artist-Educators is a multi-faceted and on-going process, for Year 1 of YEP, leading LTTA Artist-Educators were brought in from other regions of Canada to help with the training, to teach many of the YEP classes, and to mentor the region's new artists. By the end of Year 3, the roster of LTTA YEP Artist-Educators was composed almost entirely of regional artists.

Over the three years of programming, the LTTA YEP Artist-Educators identified the following benefits they believed they derived from their program involvement:

- Artistic partnerships and connections with regional youth
- Engaging hesitant students, witnessing "aha" moments of sudden comprehension of school subjects
- Seeing classrooms engage with curricular material through their specific art forms
- Having struggling students achieve success in their assignments
- Getting creative ideas from youth
- Networking with other artists in other art forms, and collaborating with teachers and students in developing and growing ideas around the curriculum
- Seeing youth grow in confidence and self-esteem
- Teaching professional development workshops in arts-based instruction to teachers
- Introducing youth to different art forms
- Getting paid to do what they love to do
- Working with the Alberta LTTA Regional Manager and meeting the other artists

Based on this feedback, it became clear that the LTTA Artist-Educators found their YEP work rewarding. Furthermore, their training as LTTA Artist-Educators has prepared them to work not only within LTTA, but also beyond, inviting employment in the arts across a wide variety of school and community settings.

Closing Comments

YEP has flourished in the Wood Buffalo Region and is a model of what can be achieved through the sensitive and sustained building of capacity in partnership with community members and committed funders.

From 2010 to 2013, YEP provided arts-based school programming that engaged students, engendered their enthusiasm for school learning, and improved their academic achievement. ***The academic gains as exhibited by the PAT results are impressive and very encouraging.***

Of particular note is the fact that YEP promoted the school and social success of FNMI students through arts-based programming that suited FNMI learning styles and values, engendered cultural pride and self-worth, and educated them, along with non-FNMI students and teachers, about FNMI cultures. The in-school, afterschool, and summer programming all have cultivated inter-cultural understanding by providing relevant and engaging programming that crossed cultural and ethnic lines.

By helping teachers develop their capacities for arts-based teaching, YEP gave them more tools to provide successful differentiated instruction that met a wide variety of learner capacities and preferences while addressing the unique needs of a booming multi-cultural region.

YEP's after-school and camp programs provided safe gathering places to participate in pro-social activities for regional youth during their leisure hours and contributed to the development of arts and life skills.

In a region where arts activities are not readily available to the majority of youth, YEP inspired an appreciation for the arts in youth, instilled artistic skills and knowledge, and awakened a hunger for school and community arts experiences.

To achieve all of the above required the development of LTTA YEP Artist-Educators that are well-trained, effective, and sensitive to regional conditions, which the Wood Buffalo Region can now count among their community. These specially-trained professionals now possess the confidence and skills to facilitate arts-based learning experiences both in and beyond YEP.

LTTA's YEP greatly influenced the well-being of many Wood Buffalo Region youth from 2010 to 2013. Clearly, many of those effects were cumulative, with the strongest effects seen in Year 3. When an intervention has had so many positive impacts, it is hoped that the necessary resources are found to sustain an important, ongoing influence.