

Growing Together:
Report Submitted to New Humble Community School Association



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A Bird's Eye View of the Growing Together Discussion

This report captures the key ideas that were discussed at the Growing Together dinner on April 22, 2022—a collaboration between New Humble Community School Association and the University of Alberta. Below is an executive summary of key sentiments regarding the strengths of NHCS and what the community sees for its future that emerged from the table talk discussions. In the report that follows I have thematically synthesized key findings.

Strengths and unique aspects of NHCS, and considerations for the future:

- Learning is “hands-on” and “engaging”, and students are “excited to learn” and the potential for retention of learning is increased
- Agriculture lens teaches students “obligation, responsibility, and consequences”; students develop a work ethic through chores and learning how to care for animals and plants
- There is continuity between what students are learning at school and their lives at home and in the community; students learn the “basics of life”, “where food comes from”, “budgeting/operations of projects”, “life cycle of plants and animals”
- Knowledge gained is pertinent to students’ “real lives”; students gain skills that are applicable now and for their futures
- Students are learning leadership through responsibility, opportunities to manage projects and solve problems, and working together across grades
- Students are learning to care for and respect animals, to become responsible for the environment because they are interacting directly with it through the animals on site, teachers’ engaging lessons (e.g. flying and crawling insects), and agriculture field trips
- Sense of community: everyone “helps each other, knows each other, cares for each other”; “older students mentor younger grades”—potential for building life-long bonds is strong; “the staff and board created a place for open, honest, and SAFE communication”
- Teachers are passionate about and committed to agriculture and the community-based philosophy of the school: “teachers really care and put their hearts into their jobs”
- The school models collaboration and the value of community partnership: working with industry and community partners (e.g. 4-H), welcoming environment, problems are solved through teamwork; “the power of community engagement”
- “Parents are given a voice, they are valued”—the existence of the school itself is a consequence of parents’ ability to mobilize and organize around something that is valued
- Technical challenges exist, such as physical space, split grade classrooms, bussing, and a gender-balanced teaching staff

The Initiation of a School-University Partnership

It starts with a seed.

On page 14 of their final charter school application to Education Minister LaGrange, Kristen Kuhn and Megan Olynyk, now Chair, Board of Directors and Member, Board of Directors respectively, wrote the above five words that aptly capture the continuing journey of New Humble Community School Association (NHCSA). As an academic with a commitment to rural schools and rural communities, I was happy to become part of NHCSA's vision to "[foster] the growth of each individual student through innovative academics, stewardship and agriculture literacy" (New Humble Community School Final Application, p. 13). In January, 2022 I met virtually with Board of Directors members, Acting Superintendent, Dr. Guy Tétrault, and Sam Pelkey, my then research assistant. That meeting planted the proverbial seed to what I am confident will be a mutually beneficial school-university partnership.

I believe that rural communities are uniquely defined by a sense of collective ownership, and NHCSA is a testament to this. Because NHCSA was a community commitment and effort, I have embraced a community-based research methodology (Strand, et al., 2003), which begins with engaging the community as a way to gain insight into their perspectives and to include stakeholders in the research venture. With this in mind, a community dinner called "Growing Together" was held on April 22, 2022 at Telford Community Hall near Calmar, Alberta. I learned that this date marked one year that the former school, New Humble School, was slated for closure. A gathering of almost 60 parents, community members (e.g. Alberta 4-H), and agriculture industry representatives (e.g. Alberta Canola) was therefore emotional and reflective, celebratory and inspiring. This was an appropriate backdrop for our dinner since the purpose of the gathering was to discuss the vision of NHCS, and this community's hopes for NHCS students. My brief report documents key themes gleaned from the organized 'table talk.'

Six Discussion Questions

After dinner, delegates were asked to discuss at their tables six questions:

1. In 30 words or less, describe what's great about the education for students in New Humble Community School.
2. What's unique or special about New Humble Community School compared to other rural schools?
3. What are the top three strengths of the school (what would you want to highlight for others)?
4. Think about your children after they leave NHCS—how are they different than children who have attended other schools?
5. In the future, what contribution would you hope to make to education (other schools) in the Province of Alberta?

6. If you had a magic wand and you could change one thing regarding NHCS, what would that one thing be?

I gathered the notes that were taken during the 30-minute table talk and the whole-group discussion afterwards. Over cups of tea I read and re-read, and while walking my dog, I thought about what is the 'story' of the data. I have also spent a couple of days in February at NHCS, talking with Board of Directors, teachers and staff, and observing classrooms. I included these experiences in my reflections where appropriate.

The Story of the Data: Key Themes

I used what is called open coding to sort through the data at first. This means I simply attended to all ideas recorded that showed novelty and convergence, and captured the idea with a 'code'. I grouped codes into categories that ultimately highlighted that both the content and process of students' learning experiences were important aspects of what parents and community members thought was unique about NHCS. What NHCS has provided so far, and what parents and community members hope for the future is a learning experience that will give students academic grounding, clear understanding of agricultural elements such as where food comes from, transferrable practical skills, and socialization that makes them citizens of humanity and the planet.

"Real Life" Learning

Words like "engaging", "applicable", "hands-on" and "relatable" were noted throughout the data, and these descriptions corresponded to an overall theme that learning is, as one delegate had written, based on "real stuff". Importantly, agriculture is not an extracurricular option for students, but rather, it is the foundation which gives students an opportunity to learn through animals, the outdoors, and industry. That agriculture is a lens and not an add-on was important. Consequently, with little or no separation between the life students are surrounded by and what they are learning about creates continuity and relevance. At my own table, parents shared that their child enjoyed school since attending NHCS, but also, that they carried their learning with them. When they helped out with clearing branches at home, for example, they paid attention to how fungus grew on the tree trunks. They were observant about nature as a result of it being emphasized at school. Their child wanted to talk about what they learned at school, and reminded their parents when they forgot to ask that typical question, "What did you learn at school today?"

Knowing where food comes from and how to care for animals connects academic learning to home life for students in this school. Thus, I could see the seamlessness between home and school, and I imagine this gave students opportunities to apply their learning in both contexts.

Importantly, the connection between learning and real life was thought to make learning enjoyable for students. When students see relevance in what they are learning and are actively

applying it, motivation and engagement may improve. As the saying goes, if you don't have an engaged learner, you don't have a learner. It was heartwarming for me to hear parents describe how their children enjoyed going to school. Although that seems like such a simple idea, that matters a lot.

Task Responsibility and Work Ethic

Another theme that was clear in the data was that students were learning responsibility and developing a strong work ethic. Caring for the animals was directly related to this. I recall a conversation at a table with a parent who said their children reminded them when it was their turn to do the chores at school on weekends. Having respect for animals and the environment, and developing a strong work ethic were believed to be assets that students would carry beyond school, no matter what they pursued.

I recall the first visit to NHCS. Sam, my research assistant, asked students about the 'barn schedule' and the roles that students took on (e.g. barn manager). Students were excited to talk about it, and I saw this in action during another school visit. It was February, but no one complained about having to go outside in the cold. Based on what I saw, I believe the students enjoyed this part of their day. Someone had written on their discussion question sheet that having animals to 'break up the day' was a benefit for students. Students were comfortable interacting with the animals that day when I tagged along during their lunch hour chores. Most importantly, the students knew things about the animals. One student told me about the proper blend of ingredients for the goats' feed, and how the goats were affected if the blend was not right. This same student also informed me that a five-prong pitch fork is superior to a four-prong pitch fork. I had no idea, but that makes a lot of sense to me now! The point is, I could see the knowledge at play, and I could see the students cared about the animals. What they were doing is called 'chores', but it didn't seem like a chore. A sense of responsibility and work ethic have something to do with this I think, and those were definitely attributes that the parents and community members at the Growing Together dinner thought was important. I'm wondering whether and/or how this might translate into academic responsibility, or commitment to learning.

Social Responsibility and Sense of Belonging

Repeated in the notes from the table talk was that the school was a 'good' place to be for the students as it gave them a place to be themselves, but to also make connections with others, and to develop a sense of community. The agricultural lens was a unifying element, but yet there is no expectation that all students pursue a life of agriculture after their schooling. Experiential, project-based learning engages the whole school—everyone knows about the chickens hatching, for example—and while there is academic benefit, clearly the agriculture lens is perceived to have a social impact.

Furthermore, there were repeated comments about the value of cross-grade interactions. Opportunities for students in higher grades to learn with students in younger grades creates a sense of social responsibility and affords older students a chance to develop their leadership skills.

At the dinner I commented on my observation of recess that day I was at NHCS. I noted that everyone had someone to spend recess with. A lot of the students were playing on the equipment (they knew the rule about the 'big' and 'little' playgrounds and how to take turns), some were shoveling the snow in the ice rink, a couple of students were skating together, and others were chatting and walking on the grounds. One student spent time with me and filled me in on how things worked at recess, and the fact that there was going to be a community ice skating party on the weekend. We chatted about this and that. As I remarked at the dinner, it was wonderful to *see* that sense of belonging. I'm sure students have their moments and their days—conflict happens in all social spaces—but I agree with what I saw in the notes that NHCS is a good place to be. I felt it the first day I came to the school. I was immediately greeted when the door was opened, and this gesture automatically signals that people care. The sentiment from the Growing Together discussions seems to be that students are not only gaining knowledge and learning how to be responsible for animals and plants, but they are learning citizenship, compassion, and caring for everything. I'm curious about what can be learned about the social benefits of experiential learning through an agricultural lens.

The Magic Wand Question

The final question for the table talk invited guests to think about what they would change about NHCS. Ideas recorded confirm that the community has confidence in how the school has been operating, and has a long-term commitment to the school. For example, extending the grades to include 7-12, and enlarging the physical space (including a parking lot!) were repeated. There was also interest in sharing the school's innovations in promoting agriculture literacy through collaboration with the local secondary schools (e.g. initiatives to engage the public schools) and other charter schools in the province. Formalized networking could certainly serve not only charter schools, but other schools with an interest in pedagogical and curricular innovation through agriculture, experiential learning, and land stewardship. A comment was made about the role that NHCS could play in addressing the "stigma of charter schools". This is an apt comment; I am learning that there is considerable misunderstanding of the nature and role of charter schools in the province, and a misperception that the Alberta government is funding private schools.

Of course, despite the positive nature of the discussions, there was recognition that NHCS faces some challenges; autonomy over bussing, achieving gender balance in the teaching staff, and moving away from split grade classes were items noted. These are technical challenges, however, and as the school grows solutions will become available. What's important to emphasize is that the tenor of the comments in this last question indicate not only satisfaction with what the school has already accomplished, but excitement for its future.

The Germination Stage

The Growing Together dinner provided me with insights into what parents and community members view as the *raison d'être* of NHCS. This helps me to understand what the community values for its children, and what are the expectations for children's learning experiences. I am intrigued by questions such as:

- What can be learned about students' engagement in learning when it occurs through the lens of agriculture literacy?
- In what ways does an agriculture-based and experiential learning focused school enhance:
 - student learning experiences?
 - student learning outcomes?
 - students' development of work ethic?
 - students' development of social and/or environmental responsibility?
- How does learning through agriculture contribute to sense of belonging for students, teachers, parents, and community members?
- What can be learned about student flourishing from an agriculture-based and experiential learning school?
- In what ways does innovative programming contribute to teacher flourishing? teacher retention in rural school contexts?
- What can be learned from NHCS about effective parent and community engagement (and leadership) in schools?
- In what ways do rural communities enhance student learning experiences?
- How can NHCS be the foundation for developing agriculture literacy outcomes for Alberta schools?

These are preliminary 'musings', but the Growing Together dinner has planted seeds. It seems appropriate to employ an agriculture metaphor to suggest that the seeds require time to germinate. What this means in research terms is that the next step for me is to explore the literature to identify gaps in the literature to determine a meaningful research question—one that meets academic and community requirements. In addition to what I learned from the Growing Together event, the professional development day on April 29, 2022 suggested to me that there would be value in a two-pronged approach: engaging in an empirical study but also working towards developing Alberta-specific agriculture literacy outcomes. NHCS is ideally positioned to contribute to both advancing knowledge about educational innovation in rural schools, as well as setting standards for agriculture-based education.

Thank you again for expressing confidence in me to fulfill your research mandate, and to be part of the NHCS journey. I look forward to growing together.

Respectfully submitted,

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References

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