



Cape Breton-Victoria Regional Centre for Education

Meeting of the Regional School Advisory Council

Teams Meeting, February 25, 2026, 7 p.m.

In attendance:

John Berk
Allison Boutilier
Beth Gillis
Krista Smith
Leslie Shepard

Susan Kelley
Suzanne Aucoin
Marjorie Graham
Heather Calder
Debbie Madore
Trevor Denhartogh

Unable to attend:

Veronica Merryfield
Natalie MacAskill
Alex Paul
Kirt Winter

Backpack Program (Trevor Denhartogh, Executive Director, Undercurrent Youth Society)

Trevor began by introducing himself and providing the group with an overview of the program. Last fall, Humanity International partnered with Undercurrent to provide 1200-1500 backpacks to the Glace Bay/New Waterford communities. It was so successful that Humanity International wants to partner again, this time providing backpacks to all students in need across the CBRM and Victoria County, which could mean supporting 5,000-6,000 students.

There are other programs that provide a similar service so they will be sensitive to that, inviting them to partner as well. A representative from Humanity International will be visiting in late March and will meet with Susan to discuss the logistics for addressing the specific supply needs for each grade level, as well as other considerations.

Typically, these backpacks include items from a school supply list along with Amazon and community-based gift cards/vouchers. They also provide students with a variety of backpacks (cartoons for younger students and a variety of colors, etc., for the older students.) Families in need will be able to request a backpack through a secure website link shared directly with them, ensuring the sign-up process remains discreet and stigma-free.

There is a possibility that the backpacks may arrive pre-packed but that is yet to be determined. Distribution is a significant consideration this year. Last year they were picked up, but with things scaling up, Trevor is looking for new ideas. We are confident as a region

that we will be able to get enough volunteers to get the job done. We will keep the Regional SAC group informed as things progress.

School Supplies (Suzanne Aucoin)

Suzanne gave an update on where we are with this. Hamster, our supplier, has agreed to keep the same prices until June. Schools have been very pleased with the prices and the supplies available to them, but ordering is an issue – not user friendly. Suzanne is working with them to create an order form specific to us. That way they can simply click on the item and choose the amount. It is her hope that this will be in place by March. Once this new order form is in place, Suzanne will give it to Marjorie to share with the Regional SAC members. She feels that this, along with the backpack program, will be a great benefit to our students.

Food Policy (Debbie Madore, School Food Lead)

Debbie introduced herself to the group and shared some history on our food initiatives. She launched the Breakfast Program back in 1999 which is still going strong in our 38 schools, and she now leads the School Lunch program currently serving 34 schools. The initial Food and Nutrition Policy was introduced in 2007. At our last meeting, there was a question around what snacks are in our schools and what is acceptable. Apples are always available on-site, and while parents are encouraged to provide snacks, when possible, the Salvation Army also contributes. They have requested a list of snack items to ensure their donations support our policy. Debbie confirmed that our Breakfast and Lunch programs meet our provincial food policy guidelines.

There was discussion about accommodating special dietary needs. Are there plans to broaden the program, so it better supports students with dietary restrictions? Debbie recognizes how important this awareness is and is committed to an equity-focused approach. Her goal is always to do more and to keep getting better. While off-site meal preparation limits our ability to meet individual custom requests, gluten-friendly options are available at times throughout the week. Debbie is also exploring additional “on the side” selections to increase variety.

Marjorie will send the group Debbie’s contact information so they can contact her directly with any questions.

Thought Exchange (Heather Calder, Communications/PR Manager)

Heather introduced herself and shared an overview of Thought Exchange with us. Thought Exchange is an innovative engagement and survey platform where users share thoughts on specific questions and rate the feedback of others. Thought Exchange has a very intuitive software program with an AI component that can pull feedback together identifying possibilities and trends. By moving beyond traditional surveys, we can capture a broader and more inclusive range of perspectives than a typical public meeting allows. It is accessible for

everyone and is anonymous. Although it is fairly new to us, other regions have had great success with it.

Thought Exchange was successfully used in previous initiatives including the Brookland and Cusack boundary changes and more recently an Operational Services survey regarding inclement weather and bussing notifications. The survey assisted in tweaking practices and gave a road map to improve operations based directly on community feedback. This spring, we will launch a survey to engage families in providing feedback on our successes and areas for improvement. SACs will be notified before this goes live. Another unique feature of Thought Exchange is that the platform allows participants to revisit their responses to view feedback and see how others may have expanded on their ideas.

A concern was raised regarding “group think” particularly around the area of inclusion. It was suggested that minority viewpoints (low-responses) be given careful consideration alongside the majority feedback. Another question was raised regarding whether Thought Exchange provides a translation feature considering the many newcomers in our region. It appears that it does, but Heather will confirm.

Susan noted that the Student Success Survey, where low/high data is especially important, is currently being updated, and it will be ready next year.

Additional Information

Our next meeting will be in April/May and will be in person.

The meeting ended at 7:55.