Confederation Park Community School
‘Kids and Cats – A Literacy Program’
Evaluation

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Infinity Consulting

Nurturing Capacity
Founding Sponsor

Suncor Energy Foundation
Preface

**Nurturing Capacity: Building Community Success**

Indspire supports communities to improve educational outcomes through the documentation and evaluation of their innovative practices. This community-led process is supported by an Indspire-funded Indigenous scholar, who works with programs on the ground to provide training on data collection and evaluation methodology.

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**Project Abstract**

**Kids and Cats – A Literacy Program** was created by the staff at Confederation Park Community School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in partnership with the Saskatoon Street Cat Rescue Initiative (SCAT). It combines reading interventions with animal therapy to strengthen students’ reading levels while improving confidence and developing critical social skills. Research shows that youth benefit from literacy interventions that focus, not just on specific skill development, but also relationship building that creates safe non-threatening spaces. Animal therapy based literacy interventions can successfully create these conditions. This program evaluation provides an in-depth analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, demonstrating a strong correlation between this program and improvements in reading and social skill development. Issues covered include possible long-term impacts and next steps to ensure further success for this program for Saskatoon’s Indigenous youth.

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Kids and Kats Yo
A Rap Song created by the Kids & Cats Youth

It’s a great place to be
Spend every Monday
Reading to dogs and kitties

Luallen and Geisha
Vince and Hobbs
Ruth waiting at the door
She says “come in-Its no probs”

We are reading to the kitties
We are havin’ such fun
Its kinda sad its June
Cause we are all done!
Executive Summary

In 2014 Confederation Park Community School, in partnership with the Street Cat Rescue Initiative (SCAT), created the Kids and Cats Literacy Program. Structured as both a literacy and behavioural intervention, it combines focused reading time with animal therapy and seeks to strengthen students’ reading levels while improving confidence and developing critical social skills. Research shows youth benefit from literacy interventions that focus not just on specific skill development but also relationship-building and safe, non-threatening spaces. Animal therapy based literacy interventions can successfully create these conditions.

It is hoped this intervention program would have a positive impact in the areas of:

- Student engagement and behaviours;
- Academic achievement;
- Self-confidence and self-esteem; and
- Relationship-building and social skills.

By offering the youth of Saskatoon a quiet, safe, calm, hands-on learning environment, the Kids and Cats Literacy Program provides them with opportunities to increase their abilities to read while interacting with, and often caring for, animals. They are able to develop critical life skills such as compassion, empathy, trust, and respect while building relationships with the animals as well as with the other students and the staff.

The following evaluation assesses the effectiveness of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program in creating a positive impact in the areas mentioned above, including the overall view of the program from the perspective of the administration, staff, and funders – as well as that of the youth and their caregivers participating in the program.

This report provides an overview of this program as well as some of the other programming Confederation Park Community School offers. It includes a logic model that demonstrates the project flow and processes. In addition, both qualitative and quantitative data sets prove that the Kids and Cats Literacy Program has been very successful in achieving its short and intermediate goals and is poised to achieve its long-term goals in the near future. In terms of the perceptions of this program, the evidence overwhelmingly supports it. All participants included in this evaluation greatly value this unique program and unanimously called for its continuation and/or expansion.

Finally, accomplishments, limitations, and next steps are outlined to assist the evaluator and Confederation Park Community School in moving in a direction that allows this program, and possibly other initiatives, to grow and thrive.
Confederation Park Community School  ‘Kids and Cats – A Literacy Program’ Evaluation

Program Description

Confederation Park Community School is located in northwest Saskatoon and is part of the Saskatoon Public School Division. This school is home to families of many cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds, including First Nations, Métis, and new immigrants to Canada. It offers programming from Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 8. Comprised of about 400 students and 160 families, served by approximately 50 staff members, this elementary school houses several programs and services to best serve the high population of Indigenous children and families that live in the Confederation Park community. Programs include the Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program, a Cree Language Kindergarten program, an alternate educational program for students with special learning needs, a parent-cooperative childcare facility, and several other individualized, family-based services customized according to needs. The school has an active school community and parent council, Elder involvement, and a Community Coordinator to ensure a strong sense of community and culture are a daily part of the students’ school experiences.¹

I. Community-Based Education Model

As part of its educational pedagogy, which shapes the types of programming and services the school offers, Confederation Park Community School operates under a community-based education model. This model supports learning by engaging, not just the student, but it includes all the members of the child’s family and community. In order for children to meet their full potential academically, socially, and emotionally, all aspects of the child’s life and experiences must be a regular part of their school experience. This extends beyond simply inviting family and community members into the building to participate in mainstream school activities. It goes beyond to create programming and services based on community identified needs and provide an environmental focus on inclusivity, cultural safety, and community-relevance.

Confederation Park Community School’s vision is “to cultivate the full potential within each student.” As such, the school offers numerous learning opportunities and activities, including: an award winning literacy program, hands-on math initiatives, extensive arts education programming, an emphasis on research skills, and outdoor learning programs. They also provide several before school, noon hour and after school activities. Confederation Park Community School has five resource teachers available to support student learning and implement interventions in the classroom and school. Programming includes English as an Additional Language (EAL).

The school offers the following unique programming and services to best meet the needs of its students and the community:

¹ For more information on Confederation Park Community School operations, programming, and services, please see their website http://www.spsd.sk.ca/school/confederationpark/Pages/default.aspx
1. School Community Councils (SCC)

The SCC, comprised of parents, guardians, and teachers, actively provides input into the education of the students. Additionally, there is a Parent and Community School Council (PCSC) that provides leadership, organizes fundraising events and initiatives that support student learning, and assists with special school events and activities. There are regular monthly meetings and all interested community members are invited to attend and participate. The council keeps the community informed through the school newsletter and a dedicated bulletin board space at the front of the school.

2. Volunteerism

Confederation Park has an open-door policy where all caregivers and community members are encouraged to participate in the daily learning of children at the school through volunteering in the classrooms. Additionally, there is a Helping Hands volunteer group that assists the school with assemblies, fundraising, and other yearly school events.

3. Community Room

The school offers a community room for members of the community to meet and participate in a variety of activities (i.e. crafts and planning SCC events), to visit and connect with other members of the community, and to engage in culturally relevant and important practices and activities (i.e. beading). The community room also offers programming focusing on adult life skill development including an adult book club and computer classes. Moreover, there is an adult section in the school library dedicated to providing adult-appropriate literature and resources.

4. Breakfast and a Book

This program was designed as both a literacy and nutrition intervention. Each week the school hosts Breakfast and a Book, which is an opportunity for families and students to enjoy breakfast at the school and to share the joy of reading together. Details regarding the program are regularly published in the school newsletter.

5. Monday Evening Events

The school hosts a number of community events every Monday evening ranging from Family Games Night, Dog Obedience Training, Parenting Information, and Child Find Identification Clinics. Once a month the school hosts a family games night. The goal is to provide families with a chance to enjoy some time together playing games that are both fun and educational. As with other programming, the details are published in the school newsletter and all community members are welcome.

6. Heart of the City Piano Program

The school offers piano instruction to students through the Heart of the City Piano Program and allows the students to engage in extra-curricular activities that might otherwise be unavailable to them.
II. Nutrition

Confederation Park Community School recognizes that effective learning cannot happen when basic needs have not been met. In particular, hunger is not only physically debilitating, it is also psychologically stressful and prevents children from achieving success. Nourished bodies and brains increase the chances for students to be calm, alert, and able to learn. This school considers itself to be a “nutrition positive school” meaning that it acknowledges food access and security issues while promoting healthy lifestyle choices. It offers positive nutritional experiences to all students, including additional supplementation on an “as-needed” basis. The school recognizes that many children may ‘suffer in silence’ if food programs are not consistent and universal. The school partners with several community-based organizations and businesses to provide a quality nutrition program. They have a full-time Nutrition Coordinator responsible for making breakfast, lunch, and snacks daily.

III. Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program

Confederation Park Community School hosts Saskatoon’s only Cree Language and Culture Program. The Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program is a bilingual/bicultural program and a joint project of the Okiciyapi Partnership involving the Saskatoon Tribal Council, Central Urban Métis Federation Incorporated, and Saskatoon Public Schools. Teachers are trained in the Dr. Grey Morning Second Language Acquisition Model and use this as their primary method of instruction. This methodology relies on images and immersion to teach the Cree language. Furthermore, cultural teachings are an integral part of the program and the students attend feasts, ceremonies, powwows, and round dances. Through the inclusion of a Traditional Knowledge Keeper and a Cultural Teacher, the students learn appropriate cultural protocols. Since its inception in September 2005, the program has expanded to offer programming from pre-Kindergarten to Grade 5. Free transportation is available from anywhere in the city.

IV. The Kids and Cats Literacy Program

The Kids and Cats Literacy Program began in the 2014-2015 school year. The project has three specific purposes: to improve behaviour, literacy, and mindfulness through engaging identified students. The Confederation Park Community School staff created a pilot project based on research from educators in Pennsylvania who found significant improvement in children’s literacy by having them simply read to cats who are adoptable and seeking forever homes. The
students who participate in the program relate to the cats as a non-threatening and attentive audience, while the cats are soothed by the rhythmic tone of the children’s voices reading to them.

**Context**

**Project Background**

*Saskatchewan’s Indigenous Youth*

Saskatchewan has a young and growing indigenous population. In particular, the Indigenous population of Saskatoon, the province’s largest city, is steadily increasing. According to the 2006 Aboriginal Peoples’ Census, Indigenous people account for 9.3% of the city’s total population — a proportion that is exceeded only by the population in Winnipeg, Manitoba (10.0%) (Statistics Canada, 2008). The majority of Indigenous people in Saskatoon identify as First Nations (53%), while 45% identify as Métis (less than 1% identify themselves as Inuit) (Environics Institute, 2011). As of September 30, 2012, of the 22,075 students enrolled in the Saskatoon Public School Division, 3747 self declared as Indigenous, comprising 16.97% of total enrollment (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2015). As of 2008, over 50% of these Indigenous youths were attending one of the ten designated “community” elementary schools in the Saskatoon Public School Division (Saskatoon Public Schools, 2015).

Indigenous people living off reserve are almost four times more likely to live in poverty than their non-indigenous counterpart. Specifically, child poverty is even more pronounced for Indigenous families in Saskatchewan where 45% of Indigenous children live in low-income families. Child poverty affects 28% of Métis children and 59% of First Nations children (The Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes in Saskatchewan, 2013). The 2006 Census states that the unemployment rate for First Nations people between the ages of 25 and 54 living off reserve was 12% (Statistics Canada, 2008). Research confirms that poverty, a lack of education, and low employment rates increase one’s chances of being involved in the criminal justice system, having higher incidents of mental health issues and addictions, and requiring long-term social assistance programming (Noah, 2007; Murray & Shillington, 2011; Wortzman, 2009). The disparity in education and employment outcomes between indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Saskatchewan remains one of the province’s largest challenges.

**Reading and Employment: The Literacy Connection**

In order to realize Saskatchewan’s full potential, the province must improve the educational outcomes for First Nations and Métis populations (Conference Board of Canada, 2013). In 2012, members of the Government of Saskatchewan, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN), and the Métis Nation - Saskatchewan (MN-S) established a **Joint Task Force on Improving Education and Employment Outcomes for First Nations and Métis People in Saskatchewan** (2013). They identified many strategies that would improve learning for Indigenous youth (pre-K to grade 12). Two of these strategies are:

- To be innovative and flexible in the structure, design, and delivery of Saskatchewan’s
curriculum to meet the needs of First Nations and Métis students; and

- To create transformative learning experiences by connecting learning to the land and to community.

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2016) announced in their 2015-2016 Annual Report that it is a goal to have 80% of students at grade level or above in reading, writing, and math by June 30, 2020. One key strategy to achieving this goal is for all schools in the province to incorporate the best practices outlined in the Saskatchewan Reads document, which include focusing on reading readiness, motivation, and reading achievement.

Reading readiness is one of the largest predictors of success in elementary schools. It reflects a child’s ability to succeed academically and socially in a school environment. Research measuring school readiness indicates that children from low-income families often start school already behind their peers who come from more affluent families. (Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007). Schools are not always in the position to equalize this gap for every child; however, research has shown that the effects of poverty can be greatly reduced using sustainable interventions. While much of the research and subsequent policy focuses on early interventions (those implemented prior to grade 3), later interventions can be successful and schools can make a difference (Ferguson, Bovaird, & Mueller, 2007). Another area impacted by poverty is school achievement and motivation to learn. As reading is fundamental to most measures of school performance, it is especially important to ensure that all children achieve adequate reading skills. Current educational research identifies that supplemental (or extra) reading practice results in accelerated levels of reading. Both school achievement and the motivation to learn are therefore greatly impacted when extra practice in reading is provided through purposeful reading interventions (Dyson, Hett, & Blair, 2003).

**Tier One and Two Literacy Interventions**

Interventions are “anything a school does, above and beyond what all students receive, that helps a child succeed in school” (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2012, p. 129). According to Saskatchewan Reads (2015), a document prepared for Saskatchewan educators by the Provincial Reading Team, successful literacy interventions must focus on the unique needs of the student population. Furthermore, interventions are processes – not programs – focused on supporting an individual student’s learning needs. In order for reading interventions to be successful, they must use high quality, purposefully selected texts that are interesting and enjoyable and focus on developing positive personal relationships that go beyond the student’s learning needs (Provincial Reading Team, 2015).

In tier one interventions, instruction for all students occurs in whole-class, small group, and individual settings, usually with the classroom teacher guiding the lessons. Within this context differentiated support, targeted instruction, and intensive supports can be given to the students based on need. For many students this may be sufficient to ensure they are reading and learning at grade level. However, struggling readers often require tier two interventions support in order to be successful. These interventions go beyond what is offered in the classroom during daily literacy instruction and activities and may include working with a specialist, extra reading time at home, or completing literacy intervention programs outside of the classroom. These interventions also require considerable support from other educators and staff in the building.
and may include designing programs where students can access additional supports outside of the school. These interventions are successful when they are built on positive relationships and occur within a supportive, quiet, nurturing environment with a reduced student-teacher ratio (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009; Allington, 2012).

*Animal Therapy Based Interventions*

Animal therapy is being used extensively and successfully in many contexts to help people. In particular, service dogs now assist in the fields of medicine, social work, policing, and psychiatry. Recently, the use of animals has been incorporated into the field of education and most recently, rescue animals rather than trained service dogs, have been successfully used in educational interventions (Geist, 2011). The success of using animals with children is that youth view them as non-judgmental participants who are outside of the complications and expectations of human relationships. This unique interaction may offer children a valuable form of social and emotional support in educational and therapeutic settings (Friesen, 2010). While the animals do not ‘fix’ the behavioural or academic challenges the students may face, they help the students to de-escalate and refocus so they can be in a position where they are ready to read, and therefore ready to learn (Geist, 2011).

*Objective of the Project*

Confederation Park Community School identified the following objectives of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program:
- Strengthen students’ reading skills;
- Improves self-esteem as they become better readers;
- Help the students develop social skills and mindfulness; and
- Help provide comfort and care for cats awaiting adoption.

*Scope of the Project*

The *motto* of the Confederation Park Community School is:

*“Share Our Gifts Through Respect, Responsibility and Positive Relationships. We strive to create a safe, warm environment where all students and families feel welcome and valued. At Confederation Park, we celebrate life long learning and invite you to join us!!”*

The Kids and Cats Literacy Program has been structured to serve approximately 18 students per year, from grades four to eight. Three groups of six students are selected to participate in the program at one time and the groups are rotated from October to May of the school year. Students are identified by the staff as meeting the requirements for the program and are admitted if and when there is space available. These requirements include: students performing below grade level in literacy; students with behavioural needs who would benefit from learning to be mindful and calm; and students with anxiety issues or those who are suffering from trauma, significant personal loss, and/or other emotional circumstances.
The program runs every Monday afternoon for two hours (including travel time). At present, the location is a SCAT (Saskatoon Street Scat Rescue) rescue home in Saskatoon. The students are transported after lunch by Confederation Park School staff to the private residence (whose owner operates the SCAT-funded cat rescue facility). In addition to having several rescue cats in her care, she also has several of her own pets (including cats and dogs) that participate in the program. The students are provided with reading materials and snacks at the residence as well. The selected students are accompanied by at least two supervising adults, usually the resource teacher and school social worker.

Initially, the cat rescue operator teaches the students how to properly interact with the animals and provides information on what it means to be a “rescue cat,” specifically that these animals may have suffered abuse, abandonment, malnutrition, and many physical conditions as a result. The students learn how to gently and mindfully interact with the animals including proper petting techniques, how to hold the animals, and how to care for and feed them (they are sometimes allowed to assist the home owner with these tasks). Many students may have anxiety and fear around animals or lack positive experiences with pets. These students are able to gradually become comfortable with the animals so they too can be successful.

Once the students and animals are comfortable and adjusted the program begins. Each encounter follows the same routine:

*These books have been purchased specifically for the program to ensure they are appropriate, interesting, and able to improve the students’ overall reading ability.

Throughout each encounter, the children remain calm and let the cats come to them. Group reading occurs in addition to reading to self and the cats. The students also have the opportunity to care for the cats (including feeding and grooming). Some of the students have no previous experience with animals so they can learn to be close to animals through this program.
Brief History of the Project

Historical Overview

In the 2014-2015 school year, several staff members at Confederation Park Community School designed a tier two reading intervention program targeting students who were academically capable but were performing below grade level in literacy measures, and who struggled socially and emotionally. Inspired by groundbreaking work being done by other educators in the United States, the staff designed a program that incorporated interactions with animals into literacy interventions. The students, guided by program facilitators, learned how to self regulate, have a stronger locus of control, and be increasingly mindful when working with the animals. The overall goal of animal assisted therapy programs is to improve the social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing of those participating. By including a clear and purposeful literacy component, this program is able to target academics as well.

The staff was able to secure funding from Nestlé Purina PetCare Canada ($500 per year) for the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years. This funding covered the various costs of the program including purchasing snacks and books for the students, and providing the cat rescue facility (a private residence in Saskatoon) with resources to better care for the animals. The current detailed budget for programming is as follows:

35 Weeks of Programming

- Nutritional snack for selected students @ $10/week = $350
- Bi-monthly donation to shelter @ $50 = $200
- Books for 6 children and 2 supervising adults @ $20 x 8 = $160

Total amount required: $710.00

Two years later, this program has established itself as a foundational part of the school’s reading intervention strategy. It offers the students assistance in literacy as well as social and emotional development. Since its inception the staff, students, and their caregivers have come to love the program and see the value in having a safe space to read and learn. Moreover, the students are learning to care for animals and are developing critical problem solving, communication, and emotional skills.

Connecting Indspire Principles

The Kids & Cats Literacy Program closely aligns with the following Indspire principles:

- **Principle 3**: Indigenous Knowledges (ways of being, knowing, valuing and doing), which convey our responsibilities and relationships to all life, is a valued and foundational aspect of the learning program for all children and youth.
- **Principle 5**: Learning is viewed as lifelong, holistic, and experiential, which is rooted in language and culture, is place-based, spiritually oriented, communal, and open to multiple ways of knowing the world.
- **Principle 6**: Programs, schools, and systems are responsive to the aspirations and needs of Indigenous peoples.
Confederation Park ensures that “Indigenous Knowledges (ways of being, knowing, valuing and doing), which convey our responsibilities and relationships to all life is a valued and foundational aspect of the learning program for all children and youth” by continuously including traditional knowledge into the curriculum, employing Traditional/knowledge Keepers and Cultural Teachers, and implementing programming that offers traditional ways of knowing in a culturally safe and relevant manner. Specifically, the Kids and Cats Literacy Program ensures the students are learning that all living things are connected and they are developing critical stewardship skills. By caring for the wellbeing of the cats they are, in turn, assuring their own wellbeing and are learning a central tenant of Indigenous Knowledge: that all things are interconnected and the survival of all life is important and contingent on forming healthy, reciprocal relationships.

It recognizes that “learning is viewed as lifelong, holistic, and experiential, which is rooted in language and culture, is place-based, spiritually oriented, communal and open to multiple ways of knowing the world.” For this reason, this program seeks to create an opportunity for youth where they are able to learn through an experiential, dynamic, and holistic experience. Rather than creating a literacy intervention that focuses solely on targeting literacy skills, it places a huge emphasis on learning through emotional experiences. All aspects of the youths’ lives are expected to be challenged and impacted. It is an academic experience, but it is also largely a personal journey that is transformative and has lifelong impacts for many.

In terms of ensuring that “programs, schools and systems are responsive to both the aspirations and needs of Indigenous peoples,” the school operates on a strengths-based, community-centred model that is not based on identifying personal deficits, problematic behavioural concerns, or negative school experiences. This program, in particular, seeks to provide the youth with an opportunity to learn critical skills in a non-threatening, non-judgemental environment. They benefit from a learning environment that is separate from the school, where many stressors may be present. They are able to work on skills privately and are not subjected to many of the pressures that surround learning how to read in traditional education contexts. For indigenous youth, this has large impacts. The legacy of colonialism, along with firmly entrenched systemic racism and policies that once served as the foundation of modern education system, has contributed to low self-image and lack of confidence. This program seeks to find the best possible opportunities for youth beyond their regular academic experience.
Activities Accomplished

Confederation Park Community School represents the Kids and Cats Literacy Program accomplishments by focusing on these four program goals:

- Increase overall attendance for students participating in the program by creating an "investment" in the program
- Decrease behavioural incidents during school and increase social and emotional skill development
- Lessen the severity and intensity of tier one and two interventions
- Increase literacy test scores and improve overall literacy skill development

Logic Model

A logic model has been created to demonstrate the inputs, outputs, outcomes, and time frame of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program. This model has been instrumental in designing and driving the programming and evaluating its impact. It provides a visual of nearly all aspects of the project as well as its goals. Please see Appendix A on page 52.
## Performance Indicator and Measures

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<tr>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Success Indicators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensure high level of student</td>
<td>Behavioural incidents reporting</td>
<td>Student participation and motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>engagement</td>
<td>Attendance reports</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure a high level of academic</td>
<td>Standardized test performance for literacy</td>
<td>Students meeting or exceeding grade level expectations of provincial standardized tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>achievement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support “whole” child</td>
<td>Evidence of interventions targeting nutrition, identity, family issues, and individual personal and academic needs (anecdotal records)</td>
<td>Students basic emotional and physical needs are met and they are ready and willing to learn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and sustain community</td>
<td>Budgets, fundraising initiatives</td>
<td>Continuation and expansion of the program</td>
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<td>partnerships</td>
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Evaluation

Data Results

Overview

The data presented below reflects the short-term, intermediate, and long-term goals of the implementation of Kids and Cats Literacy Program. When possible, data sets were compared on certain outcome measures. In order to effectively measure the success of this program, several data sets were used, as well as qualitative and quantitative surveys and interviews.

Through a combination of charts, graphs, and thematic analysis, the following outcomes were measured:

- **Short-Term Goals:** attendance, student engagement, confidence and independence, problem solving, and social skills;
- **Intermediate Goals:** increase relationships between students and their peers, and students and staff;
- **Long-Term Goal:** engaged, educated, and capable youth (achieving at grade level academically, socially, and emotionally).

Cohort Analysis

Quantitative and anecdotal data regarding the program was provided for both the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years. Student engagement (measured through behavioural incidents), attendance, literacy scores, and interventions were measured.

In order to best present the data, the students were separated into four separate cohorts:

- **Cohort A:** students who participated in the program in the 2014-2015 school year (3 students)
- **Cohort B:** students who participated in the program in the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school year (one student)
- **Cohort C:** students who participated in the program in the 2015-2016 school year (4 students)
- **Cohort D:** students who have participated in the program since 2016 (3 students)

I. Student Engagement

*Behavioural Incidents & Interventions*

The following anecdotal reports were made available by the staff at Confederation Park. They include accounts of the students’ behaviour, emotional and social wellbeing, and the necessary behavioural adaptations and interventions that have been made to assist these students. A detailed record of each student within each cohort is provided. An analysis for all students is included at the end of the section.
Cohort A

Prior to participating in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program, the first student received daily behavioural interventions including: alternate space placement within the classroom, office referrals, and support from the school resource team and counsellor. In September 2015, this student was accepted into the Cree Culture and Language Program, Grade 6/7 Pilot Project, and has not received any behavioural interventions in the past year.

The second student also received daily behavioural interventions including: alternate space placement within the classroom, office referrals, and support from the school resource team and counsellor, prior to being in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program. This student was also on a positive behaviour intervention plan due to aggressive behaviours. In September 2015, this student was accepted into the Cree Culture and Language Program, Grade 6/7 Pilot Project. Since completing the Kids and Cats Program, there has been a decrease in the intensity and frequency of behavioural interventions needed to assist this student in the past year.

The last student in this cohort also received daily behavioural interventions including: alternate space placement within the classroom, office referrals, and support from the school resource team and counsellor prior to being in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program. This student also had an alternate daily schedule and was referred for observation by the Behavioural Consultant. In the 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 school years, there has been a decrease in the intensity and frequency of behavioural incidents compared to previous school years.

Cohort B

The student in this cohort joined the Kids and Cats Literacy Program in September 2014 and remained a member of the group for the 2015-2016 school year. This student receives daily behavioural interventions including: alternate space placement within the classroom, office referrals, and support from the school resource team and counsellor, as well as an alternative schedule and support from the Cultural Resource Advisor and Traditional Knowledge Keeper. Throughout participation in the program, this student’s behaviour is consistently positive and appropriate (sometimes with one adult reminder) while continuing to need daily interventions in the classroom. However, there are improvements in the ability to communicate and problem-solve.

This student gave the following testimonial about participating in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program:

“When I go there I can hear Bean and Emma bark. The cats start to cuddle me. I give the dogs affection like that song “Love and Affection”. Kids and Cats helps me to read. They cuddle while I read to them.
I am thankful for Ms. Milen and Mrs. Zoller. They introduced me to kids and cats. I enjoyed seeing Ronald.”
**Cohort C**

The first student in this cohort had many worries and suffered significant personal loss in life. During time at school, this student communicated non-verbally and struggled at times to express verbally. Since joining the Kids and Cats Literacy Program in the 2015-2016, this student is able to speak in a group, has made friends, interacts with peers in a positive way, has conversations with adults, and has become a more relaxed and confident reader.

The next student receives daily behavioural interventions including: alternate space placement within the classroom, office referrals, and support from the school resource team and counsellor. In addition, this student has an alternative daily schedule, access to self-regulation tools and strategies, and was referred for observation by the Behavioural Consultant. This student’s behaviour during the program has been positive and appropriate, but requires continual prompts and reminders and an “over teaching” of skills by staff, continuing to require daily interventions in the classroom.

The third student’s daily behavioural interventions including: alternate space placement within the classroom, office referrals, and support from the school resource team and counsellor. In March 2016, this student joined a specialized behaviour program within the school with an alternate schedule, a modified learning plan, token economy rewards, access to self-regulation tools and strategies, and a strong focus on learning social skills and mindfulness. Since joining the program in September 2015, this student has had no office referrals from April 2016 onward.

The final student in this cohort exhibited signs of anxiety prior to entering the program (i.e. worry, distress, trouble calming down). As a result, this student received numerous tier two interventions to assist (i.e. counsellor support, modifications within the classroom to lessen anxiety). This student is notably happier, more confident, and exhibits less worries the 2015-2016 school year.

**Cohort D**

Like all of the students in Cohort D, this student joined the Kids and Cats Literacy Program in January 2016. As a new attendee to the school, this student had many worries and struggled with peer relationships, social situations, and self-regulation. Behaviour while participating in the program was consistently positive and appropriate (sometimes requiring only one adult reminder). This student continues to require redirection and adult one-on-one assistance in the classroom to communicate, problem-solve, transition, and self-regulate.

Prior to joining the program, the second student displayed signs of anxiety and distress in the classroom and at school. As a result of being involved in the program this past year, this student self-reported that s/he “worries less and cries less” and teachers reported that s/he “functions in the classroom with more strongly developed self-regulation skills.” This student also has access to an alternative space outside of the classroom as needed.
The third student struggled with social situations, peer relationships, and establishing appropriate boundaries. These behaviours occurred very rarely during Kids and Cats Literacy Program times, although this student does require some reminders.
II. Attendance

The attendance data is also presented based on cohorts. Each student represents a line on the following graphs and their attendance is represented in total days missed per year. Therefore, a line that shows a decrease in numbers demonstrates success (as this indicates less days missed that year). The attendance data provided for each student was given on an individual basis, meaning that some students have attendance data from 2009 through until 2016 and some students only have data for one or two years.

- 45% of the students had a decrease in both the frequency and intensity of severe behaviours (i.e. harm to self or others, transition problems, ruined property and/or classroom materials). As a result, necessary changes have been made to their behavioural plans and visits to the office have been greatly reduced.
- 27% of the students involved required daily assistance managing anxiety and grief. As a result of participating in the program, all of these students saw a reduction in daily school interventions to assist them. They were calmer, more confident, and able to better manage a typical school day.
- 18% of the students had issues setting appropriate boundaries, self-regulating, and establishing healthy peer relationships. Since participating in the program, they are better able to communicate and problem-solve effectively.
- Two of the students who participated in the program in 2014-2015 were admitted into the Cree Culture and Language Program, Grade 6/7 Pilot Project.
- Finally, one student has not required any behavioural interventions since participating in the program.
The data table demonstrates that:

- Student 3 had an increase in attendance from the beginning of 2014 until June 2015, while they were participating in the program. This student managed to decrease absenteeism by 41%.
- The other two students did not see a decrease in absenteeism as a result of participating in the program.
This table indicates:

- The student in this cohort had an increase in absenteeism in 2015 during his first year participating in the program, however his attendance improved dramatically in the second year he participated. In fact, he was able to decrease his absences by over 39%.
Cohort C

The results from this data table indicate:

- Student 1 and Student 4 experienced a decrease in their absences from 2015-2016 (the year they participated in the program) by 12.1% and 5.8%, respectively.
- However, Student 2 saw an increase in their absences by 13.5%.
- No attendance data was reported for Student 3 in 2015; however, there was a decrease of 13.6% in their absences when comparing absences reported in 2014 and 2016.
Cohort D

*Cohort D Attendance Data, 2009-2016*

*There was no attendance data available for the third student in this cohort.*

The data table demonstrates that:
- Student 1 had a decrease in absences by 27.5% in the year they participated in the program (2015-2016).
- Student 2 also experienced a 30% decrease in absences in the year they participated in the program (2015-2016).

**Analysis**

Overall, the cohort attendance data highlights the following:
- The majority of the students showed significant decreases in their rates of absences in the year they participated in the program. Of the eleven students that who have participated in the program, 64% demonstrated an increase in school attendance.
III. Standardized Test Performance

As with all schools in the province, student success at Confederation Park Community School needs to be measured against provincial standards. To effectively measure growth in literacy, the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment is administered in the fall, winter, and spring during the school year. The results of these standardized tests are presented below in order to demonstrate the impact reading interventions such as the Kids and Cats Literacy Program may have on student achievement.

**Cohort A**

The data table demonstrates that:
- The students in this cohort gained an average of 8.6 reading levels while participating in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program.
The above data table indicates that:

- The student in this cohort increased their reading by 10 levels in the year they participated in the program.
This data table demonstrates that:

- The students in this cohort gained an average of 3.8 reading levels while participating in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program.
Cohort D

The above data table demonstrates that:

- The students in this cohort gained an average of 5 reading levels while participating in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program.

The results indicate the following:

- All of the students who have participated in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program have shown great progress in their reading levels since participating in the program.
- In fact, the average number of reading levels gained by all students participating in the program was 6, which demonstrates a tremendous amount of growth in only one year of school.

*Student 3’s data is from January 2016 and June 2016.*
IV. Interventions

There are several other tier two literacy interventions currently operating at Confederation Park Community School. Many of these are programs that exist in other schools throughout the division and province, such as the Level Literacy (LLI) Intervention Program and some are unique to the Saskatoon Public School Division and Confederation Park Community School.

<table>
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<th>Student</th>
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<th>Readlive</th>
<th>Roadways Lite</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Daily for 50 mins</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>✓</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The data demonstrates the following:

- Nearly half (45%) of the students received additional literacy interventions while the remaining 54% did not receive any additional interventions beyond the Kids and Cats Literacy Program.
- A comparison between the standardized data and the intervention data reveals that those students jumped an average 7.4 reading levels in one year despite having received only the Kids and Cats Literacy Program intervention.
V. Qualitative Interviews

As part of the formal evaluation process, in-person interviews were conducted by Infinity Consulting during the evaluation period (June, 2016). Confederation Park Community School personnel (including administrators, staff, and program funders), participating students, and caregivers were interviewed. The questionnaire consisted of eight open-ended questions given in an interview format so that participants could use their own words while someone else recorded their responses. Given the open-ended nature of these interviews, the responses generated span a wide range and encompass many experiences. As such, the transcriptions of these interviews were analysed and similar responses were grouped together thematically. However, whenever possible direct quotations have been incorporated into the report to capture the participants’ actual responses.

The breakdown of the interview participants is as follows:
Administrators, Teachers, and Funders

There were a total of nine staff members interviewed including one administrator, three support staff, two teachers, one educational assistant, and two program funders.

Q1. Please tell me how long you have worked for Confederation Park Community School and in what capacity.

- All of the staff members interviewed worked at Confederation Park for over three years. The mean years of service for those interviewed is 5.4 years.
- A wide range of personnel were interviewed including a classroom teacher whose students participate in the program (1); a learning support teacher, community coordinator, and school councillor who spearheaded the program (3); an education assistant (1); a teacher who also has a child that participates in the program (1); and the principal (1).
- Finally, two program funders were interviewed. The first funded the program in both 2014-2015 and 2015-2016 and the second began funding the project in 2015.

Q2. Can you tell me briefly how this program and why you think it is an important program?

- The program was best described by one staff member who stated: “Kids and Cats is a literacy program offered once a week where the students go to a cat rescue shelter (in a private home) and read to animals and form their own community of readers. It is a targeted literacy and behaviour intervention for students requiring emotional and literacy support. For these students, being with animals calms them down.”
- All of those staff and funders interviewed identified some type of behavioural, social, or emotional benefit as the most important aspect of the program. Specifically, 29% identified empathy; 29% identified confidence; and 14% identified compassion as the most important skills developed in the program. According to one staff member, the program, “allows the kids to reconnect with peers and teachers and build positive social skills,” while another stated, “the welfare of both the animals and the students is at stake and this program can improve both.”
- 57% of the staff interviewed described the program as a highly specialized and successful reading intervention. According to one staff member, this interactive learning program allows students to be “calm and patient” while reading aloud. Another teacher noted that, “the students become confident readers. Even if they can’t read aloud with adults or even peers, they will read aloud with the cats.”
- Another staff member described how the program increases student engagement in a positive way stating, “I was concerned because many kids in our school were not engaged and their feelings towards school were negative. For them coming to school was challenging...Kids and Cats is one of those programs that gets the kids excited to come to school.”
Q3. What do you see as the main benefits to the youth? Can you provide an example?

- 78% of the interviewees identified the increase in confidence and independence to be the greatest benefit. According to one staff member, “The kids can learn to give back and reciprocate with people rather than asking for help immediately.”
- 78% of the staff and funders felt that the main benefit was the learning that occurred as a result of the program. There was, however, a range in the type of learning identified including: “learning reading skills,” “learning how to engage in reading,” and “learning literacy life skills.”
- For one teacher, this is critical because for many students, “there are a lot of pressures to read in the classroom in front of others and many students don’t do well in these situations,” and this program eliminates that barrier. Another teacher mentioned the benefits of learning to read in a small group setting rather than in a classroom.
- 56% of those interviewed also identified the unique bond that develops between the students and the animals to be the greatest benefit. They described this relationship as “universal,” “organic,” and as “a special connection (especially with the injured and abused animals).” One of the staff members mentioned how some of the students save their own money to buy treats and toys for the animals, despite having very limited access to the resources to do so. This teacher describes what she is seeing is the students developing a sense of “purpose and responsibility,” through the program.
- 56% of the staff and funders identified the safe, calm learning environment the program creates for the kids to be the greatest benefit. They noted that it lowers their stress levels, provides them with an opportunity to have fun, is supportive, and allows them to self-regulate in healthy ways.
- 44% explained that the relationships built between the students and their peers and the students and adults is the greatest benefit. One staff member noticed an increase in positive relationships, while another stated the kids are learning how to build long-term reciprocal relationships.
- 33% of the staff members noted improvement in attendance, while another 22% felt there was an increase in empathy, mindfulness, and compassion in the participating students.
- One of the funders noted that, “Purina’s motto is ‘people and pets are better together’ and this program encompasses the very nature of this motto.”

Q4. Do you see any areas for improvement? If so, what would you recommend? Provide an example if possible.

- All of the staff members interviewed discussed the need for greater program security or expansion. This included the need for: more sites; more animals involved; greater frequency of visits with animals; opportunities to include more children; and greater data collection.
- Half of the staff noted the limitations of short-term funding and how it restricts the ability to include more students, invest more resources, move to a larger facility or include more facilities, create programming infrastructure, and collect data and evaluate the program.

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2 This question was exempt from the interviews with the funders (2) as they are not involved in designing or delivering the program at this point.
Q5. What has been the biggest change, positive or negative, that you have noticed in the youth that attend the Kids and Cats Literacy Program? Please give an example.

- 67% of the staff members stated that an increase in mental and emotional wellbeing was the largest benefit. The responses identified increases in: positive mood, emotional stability, coping skills, communication, problem-solving, relationship building skills, happiness, empathy, compassion, patience, and trust.
- 44% identified the increase in academic skills related to literacy to be the largest positive change. Two of these respondents acknowledged the hands-on and interactive learning environment the program provides, while another attributed this success to the calm and supportive learning environment and animal therapy component.
- Yet another 44% specifically mentioned the increase in the students’ confidence and independence levels to be the biggest positive change the program brought about. One staff member shared the following story, “one little girl involved for the 2nd year of the program wouldn’t read out loud at all and this year I have seen big changes. She even went to a special camp over the summer that works with animals and the transformation in her has been amazing.”
- 33% of the staff interviewed discussed how the program lowered the number of behavioural incidents at the school. According to one staff member, “there has been a lower number of times the students are sent to the office since starting the program. When they connect with the animals there is a change in behaviour. They don’t require prompting or reminders typically needed with students on behavioural plans. They become kind, patient, and trustworthy.”
- One staff member noted the increase in school attendance.
- Finally, one staff member acknowledged the difference the program makes in the lives of the animals stating, “This program also improves the lives of the cats.”

Q6. Have you noticed any behavioural changes, positive or negative, since the youth have been part of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program? Please explain.

- All of the staff members and funders discussed the dramatic changes in the behaviour of the students who participate in the program. As one staff member explained, “A number of the youth that have had extreme behavioural challenges, to the point where we weren’t sure if we should let them attend the program, have completely changed and we have been amazed with the results. They have a strong bond with the staff members involved in the program; they have someone who believes in them. Also, the calming effect of being with cats and the giving and receiving love from the animals has been instrumental in changing their behaviour.”
- 57% of the staff noticed a decrease in anxiety behaviours in the classroom, as the students are able to self-regulate, work calmly, and work with their peers without shutting down or getting upset. According to one teacher, “One little girl I taught that would not even have talked in class two years ago,” while another mentioned how “Some kids were tearing the classrooms apart and now they are in the classrooms without one-on-one support.”
- Another 57% explained how the program has increased the students’ abilities to create healthy positive relationships with their peers and with teaching staff. For many
students, these relationships become lifelines that assist them in achieving success throughout school and will continue to serve them even after the program is completed.

- 43% of the staff noted an increase in confidence, while another two mentioned that the students are calmer, kinder, and more resilient.
- Finally, one teacher acknowledged the increase in attendance and engagement, stating, “The kids are enthusiastic and want to show up and attend the program.”

Q7. What have the youth told you about their experiences in attending the Kids and Cats Literacy Program? Please provide an example or two.3

- All of the staff has received positive feedback from the youth attending the program. According to one staff member, “They always ask when they are coming back and they all have a favourite animal.” Another interviewee explained that the students are proud to be a part of the program and love to show the adults how well they can care for the cats and read to the cats. She noted, “The kids are so proud of themselves. They love the chance to show how gentle they are.”
- 43% of the staff members explained that the kids expressed deep gratitude for being able to participate in the program and acknowledged that it helped them overcome something (i.e. fear of meeting other adults, fear of reading; fear of animals; fear of learning with peers; fear of talking). In particular, one staff member noted that, “One little girl involved this year was non-verbal, and she got the confidence to read out loud and do verbal tests in class since attending Kids and Cats.”

Q8. Is there anything else you would like to add?

- One interviewee did not have anything to add.
- 54% of the staff members interviewed reiterated how valuable this program is and the positive mental health benefits the children experience by participating in this project. According to one interviewee, “It gives kids a better sense of belonging,” while another stated, “The human-animal bond reduces stress and heart rate and the kids are so proud.”
- One staff member noted that of the greatest benefits of the program is actually a community benefit. According to this teacher, “Some people look at these kids and are scared of them and this allows people to see how much our kids have to offer and not to judge a book by its cover. It is a really important program at our school and provides a really important role in supporting our students.”
- The staff members also expressed the need to continue the program, while another mentioned the need for expansion stating, “Pet therapy programs should be involved in all schools.”

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3 This question was exempt from the interviews with the funders (2) as they do not regularly interact with the youth involved.
Students

There were a total of 11 students interviewed. Of those students, one is in grade 4, five are in grade 5, three are in grade 6, one is in grade 7, and one is in grade 8. Some of the students attended the program in the 2014-2015 school year, while others attended for the 2015-2016 school year.

Q1. What do you think the best part was in going to the Kids and Cats Literacy Program? Please share a few examples.

- 91% of the students interviewed identified interacting with the cats (and dogs) as the best part of participating in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program. One student noted that Hobs, the cat, is his favourite and reading with him is “the best part.” Another student stated that reading with the cats changed her because, “At first I was scared of the animals but I feel better and more confident about animals.”
- 73% of the students noted that reading was the greatest part of the program. For most of these students, they enjoyed getting to read aloud; getting to read alone; getting more time in the school day to read; and getting to read their favourite books.
- 36% appreciated the snacks, particularly the special treats (i.e. Christmas cookies and treats on the last day of the program).
- Two of the students acknowledged the privacy the program offered as one of the best aspects. One student stated, “Getting to sit in silence is the best because you can read with no one talking to you or bothering you.”
- Two of the students enjoyed spending time with their peers.

Q2. What do your friends think of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program? Can you share any examples (positive or negative)?

- 73% of the students stated their friends think the program is great. Some of the students interviewed stated their friends wished they could participate. According to one student, “My friends think it’s cool that I get to see a lot cats and hang out with them and read more often because I get two extra periods to read.”
- Half of these students noted that their friends thought getting to spend time with the cats was the best part of the program.
- One student wasn’t sure what their peers thought about the program.
- One student stated he doesn’t talk about the program to his peers as he knows there are no spots available and he does not want to get them excited about something they may not be able to participate in.

Q3. Is there anything about the Kids and Cats Literacy Program that you don’t like? If so, please share an example.

- Four of the students did not identify any aspects of the program they did not like.
- Two of the students struggled with interacting with the animals. For one student, the dog licking him was too much and for the other student, several of the cats often claw at her legs and that scares her.
- Two of the students felt that leaving the program was a negative aspect and for one student having to wait all week to see the cats again was difficult.
Two of the students are teased at school by their classmates and one is also having difficulties with one of the other students in the program who he identified as “mean and rude.”

One student felt that the house smelled and there was a lot of dog and cat hair inside the house, which made him uncomfortable and negatively impacted his experience in the program.

Another student did not like the long drive.

Q4. Do you have any suggestions that you think might improve your experience in the program?

- 36% of the students interviewed wished the program was longer and they did not have to leave after only two hours.
- 27% of the students would like more animals involved in the program.
- 27% stated they would not change anything about the program.
- Two of the students mentioned expanding the program to include more facilities, more space, more students, more staff, more books, or more opportunities to learn in a hands-on environment. According to one student, “Getting more kids to do it to improve our behaviour and help us become better, we just need breaks from school.”

Q5. What did you learn while going to the Kids and Cats Literacy Program?

- 91% of the students claimed they learned a great deal about the animals (cats and dogs) in the program. Specifically, they learned animal biology, how to care for them, how to approach and interact with animals that have been abandoned and abused, how to gain trust, and how to share a space with animals.
- 36% of the participants noted the program made them better readers and one student was able to “finally learn about the stuff I was reading about in books.”
- Two of the students discussed learning proper boundaries as one student stated, “I learned not to be in everyone’s space” while the other mentioned, “learning how to share the cats with one another.”

Q6. Would you recommend that other youth from your community attend the Kids & Cats Literacy Program? Why or why not?

- 82% of the students would recommend this program to other youth in their community or school. For one student would recommend it because, “It helps you through the week and weekend when you know you have something to look forward to and when you’re feeling down you can go there and feel better.”
- Of these 82%, five of the students noted that the program teaches invaluable social and emotional skills such as, “empathy, compassion, gentleness, patience, how to be nice, respect, care, and how to gain trust.” According to one student, working with the animals, “teaches love and that if you are going through tough times the cats can be there for you.”
- Two of these student would recommend the program because it can improve their reading skills and yet another two would recommend the program because of the access to books. For one of these students recommending the program could mean that students without books would finally have access to them. He stated, “Maybe their parents don’t let them buy books or maybe they can’t do it at home.”
- Finally, one of the students appreciated the snacks.
• Of the two students that would not recommend the program, one stated they “would tell more kids about the program if there were space for them. If kids could just try it out they would love it,” while the other would not recommend the program to everyone “in case someone doesn’t like animals or is allergic.”

Q7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

• 36% of the students did not have anything else to add.
• 36% expressed how great the program and how much they enjoyed participating in the program. For one student, “I was able to overcome fears of animals and feel so much better afterwards.” Another student exclaimed how the program made them wish they had a cat at home.
• Two of the students wished the program was longer and more often than once a week.
• One student added he wished they had more dogs in the program.
• Finally, one student noted the need for more books in the program, particularly chapter books. As it stands now, this student is bringing his own books from home and does not have access to many chapter books.

Parents and Caregivers

There was only one caregiver interviewed regarding the program.

Q1. Please tell me what grade your child(ren) are in and what your overall impression of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program is in relation to your child(ren).

• The interviewee had a daughter in Grade 5 who participated in the program in the 2015-2016 school year.

Q2. What do you see as the main benefit to your child(ren)? Can you provide an example?

• According to this parent, the main benefit of this program is that, “It calms my daughter and when she reads now she is confident. It has built her reading skills.”

Q3. Did you see any areas for improvement? If so, what would you recommend? Provide an example if possible.

• This parent stated that an earlier start would be a major improvement such as targeting students in the primary grades (Kindergarten – Grade 3) and having the program run more that once a week.

Q4. What, if anything, has been the biggest change, positive or negative, that you have noticed in your child(ren) since attending the Kids and Cats Literacy Program? Please give an example.

• Since attending this camp, this parent notes that her daughter is, “more willing to try and read out loud, has the confidence to read out loud. She loves to read all the books at home, especially cookbooks and craft books. Now she wants to cook and do crafts! She asks questions about words and is willing to ask for my help and she talks to her teachers and peers more.”

Q5. Would you recommend other students from your community attend the Kids and Cats Literacy Program? Why or why not?
• For this parent, recommending the program depends on the students. She believes that, “for the kids that need it and need help with issues or reading YES, but maybe not all kids need it.”

Q6. Is there anything else you would like to add?
• This parent added that she knows this program has been an amazing support for her daughter and that the “animal therapy” has made her daughter a better reader and a happier person.

Results and Conclusions

Overview
This section will provide highlights from the data results presented in the previous section as well as the main conclusions that can be drawn from evaluating the program overall. While the purpose of this evaluation is to assess the effectiveness of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program, the richness of the data gathered cannot be overlooked. For example, the achievement of data-focused goals such as academic student success or decrease in interventions or behavioural incidents should not overshadow the increase in student-identified feelings of confidence and pride.

Analysis
These results have yielded a number of conclusions regarding the overall effectiveness of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program. Most of the feedback is extremely positive. The data demonstrates an increase in student success at school and an increase in academic skills, confidence, and social and emotional skill development, which will have a positive future impact on the engagement of youth throughout their school careers.
Highlights from the Student Engagement and Attendance Data:

- 45% of the students had a decrease in both the frequency and intensity of severe behaviours (i.e. harm to self or others, transition problems, ruining property and/or classroom materials). As a result, necessary changes have been made to their behavioural plans.
- 27% of the students involved required daily assistance managing anxiety and grief. As a result of participating in the program, all of these students saw a reduction in daily school interventions to assist them with feelings of anxiety and grief.
- 18% of the students had issues setting appropriate boundaries, self-regulating, and establishing healthy peer relationships. Since participating in the program, they are better able to communicate and problem-solve effectively.
- The majority of the students showed significant decreases in their rates of absences in the year they participated in the program. Of the eleven students that who have participated in the program, 64% demonstrated an increase in school attendance.
Highlights from the Standardised Test Performance Data and Interventions:

- All of the students who have participated in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program demonstrated tremendous progress in their reading levels.
- In fact, on average, these students advanced by over 6 reading levels.
- Nearly half (45%) of the students received additional literacy interventions while the remaining 54% did not receive any additional interventions beyond the Kids and Cats Literacy Program.
- A comparison between the standardized data and the intervention data reveals that those students jumped an average 7.4 reading levels in one year despite having received only the Kids and Cats Literacy Program intervention.

Highlights from the In-Person Interviews

- The staff and funders identified the greatest benefits of the program as: increase in confidence (78%); independence (78%); student-animal bonding (56%); safe, calm learning environment (56%); and adult-student relationships (44%).
- The staff reported the following positive changes: an increase in mental and emotional wellbeing (67%); increase in academic skills related to literacy (44%); increase in the students’ confidence and independence (44%); and a decreased number of behavioural incidents at the school (33%).
- All of the staff members interviewed discussed the need for greater program security or expansion.
- 91% of the students interviewed identified interacting with the cats (and dogs) as the best part of participating in the Kids and Cats Program, while 73% of the students noted that reading was the greatest part of the program.
- As one parent stated, “[this program] calms my daughter and when she reads now she is confident. It has built her reading skills.”
Conclusions

Several conclusions can be made from the above analysis:

- The Kids and Cats Literacy program currently helps its participants build confidence, problem-solve, and develop life-long relationships through animal therapy.
- It has decreased the number of severe behavioural incidents and taught positive emotional skills such as empathy, compassion, mindfulness, and respect.
- As a literacy intervention, this program has improved literacy scores and moreover has given the students the confidence they need to be successful readers.
- The program is widely received and endorsed by youth participants, the staff, caregivers, and the current funders.
- The program requires secure long-term funding and greater partnerships to ensure it will continue and grow. In particular, all interviewees expressed the need to offer the program to more youth.

In order for a program to be considered a best practice, several aspects must be present. The program must be deeply rooted in meeting the needs of the community it serves and it must achieve or exceed its mandate and goals. Finally, the program must follow guiding principles that are supported by current, relevant research. Throughout this evaluation, The Kids and Cats
Literacy Program has established itself as exceptional in its ability to meet the needs of the youth it serves, adhere to its goals, and focus on relevant research to guide its program development. Furthermore, it has shown tremendous promise as a ground breaking program with the ability to expand and reach even more youth in the school or community.

According to recent research, youth need opportunities to learn strong academic skills (particularly in literacy) and achieve or exceed grade-level expectations in order to successfully complete Grade 12 on time and effectively “break the cycle of poverty.” They need opportunities to use these skills in experiential, real-world contexts that are authentic and relevant. In addition, factors that typically prevent success in literacy (i.e. behavioural issues, trauma, and lack of appropriate interventions) also need to be addressed. The data from this evaluation demonstrates that the youth enrolled in the Kids and Cats Literacy Program feel they have an opportunity to increase their literacy skills in a non-threatening, hands-on learning environment. They report feeling a strong connection to the animals, the staff, and their peers in the program. Research tells us that forming these types of connections and creating safe learning environments are two of the key factors in creating effective literacy and behavioural interventions and creating meaningful learning experiences for Indigenous youth.

According to the Nestlé Purina PetCare Final Funding Report, prepared by the Confederation Park Community School staff, “Kids and Cats is such an amazing program. It really served to show us what we already know; interactions with animals can reduce stress levels and increase the sense of wellbeing. We have seen how the anxiety of some of our students has melted away as they pet the cats or play with the dogs. Our kids have been significantly motivated by their furry friends and we have seen improvements in social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. It has been a real pleasure to watch them interact with the pets, develop empathy, develop self-confidence, and improve their reading skills.”

By allowing these youth the opportunities to learn beyond the regular 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. school day and setting, this program is impacting not only the individual student but also their peer network and their community. The positive results of this type of programming extend beyond the classroom and have the ability to increase academic achievement, graduation rates, and enrolment in secondary institutions. These students now know the power of self-care (through mindfulness) and the care of other living things. Furthermore, they have gained lifelong literacy and social skills that are often difficult to learn in mainstream educational contexts. By disrupting the traditional way in which children are taught to read and offering a chance to learn these skills in an animal-therapy setting, Confederation Park Community School is decolonizing education.

The most powerful evidence of the program’s achievements does not lie in the research or the statistics, but in the perspective of the participants themselves. It is their voices that truly demonstrate the value of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program. According to one staff member, “Some people look at these kids and are scared of them and this allows people to see how much our kids have to offer and not to judge a book by its cover. It is a really important program at our school and provides a really important role in supporting our students.”
Outcomes: Most Significant Accomplishments and Lessons Learned

Accomplishments

Since its inception in 2014, the Kids and Cats Literacy Program has achieved several accomplishments including increasing youth engagement and confidence, increasing literacy standardized test performance, decreasing behavioural incidents, and implementing effective tier one and two interventions. Information gathered based on interviews with personnel, funders, parents, and youth connected with the program indicates the Kids and Cats Literacy Program is a valuable part of the students’ lives. It is directly linked to improvements in their emotional and social wellbeing as well as their academic success. Currently, the Confederation Park Community School staff is doing an excellent job of creating and administering this program. They are dedicated to putting the needs of the youth first and customizing aspects of the program to meet individual requirements. For these reasons, Confederation Park will continue to be successful – eventually leading to an increase in their long-term goal of creating educated, engaged, and empowered youth in Saskatoon.

One aspect of this program that should not be overlooked is its foundational principle of utilizing a strengths-based approach to literacy and behavioural interventions. Despite recognizing that the children participating in this program may have significant behavioural and academic struggles, this program is not about identifying deficits and attempting to directly teach specific skills. Rather, it proposes that children are capable of achieving success without constant explicit and direct instruction. Interventions can often be successful when the focus shifts to acknowledging what the student can already do rather than what they are not able to do. The students have a greater chance of developing confidence and independence when they believe the intervention is about further developing skills they already possess.

Furthermore, this program centers on developing trust and empathy in a real world, hand-on environment. Many programs and interventions targeting youth with behavioural concerns focus on direct teaching, role modeling, and the practicing of skills in classroom or artificial contexts. These approaches, while useful, tend to lose their relevance and subsequent validity when students cannot transfer these skills into real world contexts. Kids and Cats Literacy Program does not teach the students the concepts of empathy, trust, and compassion and then expect them to translate that into social contexts on their own. Instead, it allows the students to develop these critical emotions while working with the animals and their peers. This serves to entrench these skills more deeply into their brains and makes it more likely that they will be able to transfer them to person-to-person relationships in other contexts.

Perhaps two of the most telling pieces of evidence of the success of this program were given directly by the youth themselves. One student stated, “Kids and Cats helps you through the week and weekend when you know you have something to look forward to and when you’re feeling down you can go there and feel better.” Another student acknowledged that working with the animals, “teaches love and that if you are going through tough times the cats can be there for you.” Clearly, the students are aware of how this program is impacting their lives and they are aware of this special and unique opportunity.
Lessons Learned

Several lessons have been learned since the Kids and Cats Literacy Program began including:

- Staff sustainability and training is essential;
- Youth strengths and needs must be considered to optimize learning;
- Evaluation (for both students and staff) must be continuous and consistent;
- Learning must be project-based, hands-on, and experiential; and
- Funding, community outreach, and partnership are critical to build capacity.

Limitations

There are a few limitations that have been encountered since this program began. One of the largest issues is the reliance on one animal rescue facility and one person to house the program. Having it confined to a private residence is challenging as it strains the program and prevents expansion (i.e. offering the program more days of the week or to more youth). As it stands now, there is more demand than there are spots available in the program.

Another issue is with regard to program delivery. There is considerable strain on participating staff as the program relies on their willingness to evaluate and admit eligible students, provide transportation, purchase and store snacks and literacy resources, obtain parental permission, track student success, and evaluate and adapt the program. While developing and running a literacy intervention program is well within the scope of their jobs, it does place a lot of responsibility on certain individuals and makes it more challenging to separate the program from the few dedicated people who run it. The worry here is that, if these few dedicated staff members leave Confederation Park Community School, running the program would not be easily transferred to other staff in the building. In order to ensure success and longevity, the program needs to be structured in a way that limits strain on staff.

Finally, there are concerns with regard to the lack of financial resources available for the program. Constant funding renewals make it challenging to evaluate the program and make advance plans in June for the following year. These funding challenges shorten the yearly running of the program and impede growth. Secure, long-term funding would mean that the school could expand to include a larger facility, more staff, and/or recruit and accept more youth each year. Given all that is known about the needs of urban Indigenous youth and best practices in engagement and education, it would be beneficial to have greater funding options.
Next Steps

The evaluative process yielded several next steps in order for the Kids and Cats Literacy Program to move forward and continue to achieve success. Through greater capacity building, program development, long-term funding, and evaluation, this program will continue to grow and succeed.

Building Capacity

In order for the Kids and Cats Literacy Program to grow and strengthen, it must build capacity. The staff acknowledges that this is an essential piece of program delivery. However, it is also one of the most challenging aspects, as it requires considerable time and resources to build and sustain relationships and encourage investment, while still ensuring integrity of the program. The current Confederation Park Community School staff has made it a priority to establish relationships with SCAT and funders to ensure that the program is able to function from year-to-year. The next steps are to create secure partnerships that provide Confederation Park Community School with assistance in program development and delivery, transportation, nutritional delivery, evaluation, and greater access to rescue facilities.

Program Development

While the staff is satisfied with the existing program, opportunities for program development and expansion would greatly increase student success. Through the interview process and consultations, the staff, funders, administrators, and students all acknowledged several aspects of the program could be strengthened in the future – in particular, offering the program to more youth. This includes: expansion of facilities to include more rescue centers; transportation; increases in time, money, and storage to organize snacks and books; increases in duration and frequency of program; and increase in student participants.

Long-Term Funding

In order to ensure the continuation of this program, Confederation Park must secure long-term funding. Once funds are secured, a more realistic budget that reduces staff strain can be implemented. For example, parent volunteers could be utilized to transport students and staff, field trips to other SCAT facilities or the Humane Society could be arranged, and more books could be purchased. If the program was adequately funded, more students could be transitioned into the program and it could be used as a reading intervention and/or behavioural intervention more frequently.
On-Going Evaluation

A large part of the current success of the program thus far has been the result of the few dedicated staff who have created and implemented it. Program personnel and other Confederation Park Community School staff have been gathering data throughout the school year, such as attendance records, behavioural reports, and standardized test data. Limited resources have influenced the staffs’ ability to gather useful data. For example, the participating students, their caregivers, and their teachers could complete simple program evaluations to gather more information about their perceptions of the program (i.e. surveys or questionnaires).

While this report is a formal evaluation of the Kids and Cats Literacy Program, it relied heavily on the data already collected and analyzed by the Confederation Park Community School staff. It is critical that the staff continues to seek the input of students, staff, funders, and caregivers in order to expose barriers and improve what already works. A close examination of the numbers is also essential including academic performance, student engagement, and attendance rates, and in the near successful transitions from grade 8 to high school. This will give Confederation Park a greater sense of the long-term impacts the program is having in the community.
Interactive Tools

The following web links could be useful and may provide additional information:

1. The Confederation Park Community School Official Website
   ➢ [http://www.spsd.sk.ca/school/confederationpark/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.spsd.sk.ca/school/confederationpark/Pages/default.aspx)

2. The SCAT (Saskatoon Street Cat Rescue) Official Website
   ➢ [http://www.streetcat.ca](http://www.streetcat.ca)

3. Purina Canada’s Official Website
   ➢ [https://www.purina.ca/?gclid=CL_R5cu6rs4CFZSlmQodAlMH1A](https://www.purina.ca/?gclid=CL_R5cu6rs4CFZSlmQodAlMH1A)
References


Appendix A: Logic Model

Inputs
- Staff time and skills
- Collaboration among staff, families, community members, and funders
- Monitor and track student progress (attendance, behaviour, literacy scores)
- Materials and resources (i.e. snacks, books, vehicles)
- Training for students (on interacting with cats)
- Administration oversight
- Financial resources/sourcing grants or other initiatives
- Planning, research, and evaluation time and resources
- Recruitment and admissions

Outputs

Activities
- Complete all school work and focus on improving reading skills
- Ensure attendance, punctuality, positive attitude at school and during the program
- Provide useful feedback and problem solve with youth
- Create and evaluate behavioural plans
- Develop and administer tools to best orient, and teach youth how to interact with cats
- Ensure youth are safe, learning, and fully engaged in all aspects of program
- Create and sustain partnerships (financially)
- Increase exposure and hands-on learning
- Assist youth to successfully transfer literacy and life skills and experiences into classroom, school, and home

Participation
- Students (Ages 9-14)

Outputs

Short Term
- Increase in school attendance and engagement
- Increase in academic success, particularly in literacy skills
- Increase in hands-on learning experiences
- Increase in confidence and independence
- Increase in problem solving skills and social skills (including mindfulness)

Intermediate
- Decrease in daily literacy and behavioural interventions
- Increase in achievement of grade-level literacy outcomes
- Increased knowledge and appreciation of self, community, and culture

Long Term
- Engaged, educated, and capable youth (achieving at grade level academically, socially, and emotionally)

Time Frame
- One year (During Placement)
- Two years (After Placement)
- Five years
Appendix B: Consent and Interactive Forms

Indspire - Informed Consent Form

Indspire
50 Generations Drive, Ohsweken, Ontario, N0A 1M0
P: 519-445-3016

INDIVIDUAL CONSENT
(Please print or write legibly)

Name, and role in the Kids & Cats Literacy Initiative – Confederation Park Community School of the individual/Personnel, Student (over 18), Community Member, Elder/Knowledge Keeper:

Name: ________________________________
Role: ________________________________

☐ INDIVIDUAL CONSENT
I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the aforementioned information.

I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted regarding the research and understand I may ask questions in the future.

NAME: ________________________________
SIGNATURE: ________________________________ DATE: ________________________________

GROUP CONSENT
(Please print or write legibly)

☐ GROUP CONSENT

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the aforementioned information.

I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted regarding the research and understand I may ask questions in the future.

NAME: ________________________________
SIGNATURE: ________________________________ DATE: ________________________________

CONTACT INFORMATION (OPTIONAL)
Please provide your contact information if you would like to be contacted to review your transcript and/or receive a copy of the research results.

EMAIL ADDRESS: ________________________________
Dear Parents/Guardians;

I am currently involved in an exciting project with Indspire, an Indigenous-led national registered charity that invests in the education of Indigenous people for the long-term benefit of these individuals, their families and communities, and Canada. Indspire is dedicated to helping Indigenous youth reach their potential. Through a letter of understanding with Indspire and Confederation Park Community School, I have been invited to document the Kids & Cats Literacy Initiative.

I am inviting students to participate in INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS on JUNE 8, 2016 at TO BE SCHEDULED. This INTERVIEW will be audiotaped to provide a clear record of what transpired. All the information provided will be considered confidential and no names will be shared.

I hope you agree to have your student be a part of the conversation. Please see the attached informed consent letter.

Sincerely,
DR. CARRIE BOURASSA
306-519-1745 infinityconsulting@sasktel.net

PARENT/LEGAL GUARDIAN CONSENT

The undersigned does hereby give permission for our (my) child,

Name of Child: ________________________________________________________________

to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the aforementioned information. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted regarding the study and understand I may ask questions in the future.

NAME: _______________________________________________________________________

RELATIONSHIP: __________________________________________________________________

SIGNATURE: ___________________________________________________________________

DATE: ________________________________________________________________________

Please provide your contact information if you would like to be contacted to review their transcript and/or receive a copy of the research results.

EMAIL ADDRESS: ____________________________________________________________

PHONE NUMBER: ____________________________________________________________
May 2, 2016

Confederation Park Community School
Kids & Cats Literacy Initiative
Infinity Consulting Evaluation

Dear Parents:

I am a Metis consultant (owner and President of Infinity Consulting) hired by Indspire to do an evaluation of the Kids & Cats Literacy Initiative at Confederation Park Community School.

The purpose of the study is to evaluate the Kids & Cats Literacy Initiative for Indspire’s Nurturing Capacity program. Participation is completely voluntary and your decision to participate or not participate will in no way affect your existing relationships, work situation or provision of services.

This study is part of a joint research project between Confederation Park Community School and Indspire. This research will involve two student researchers who will work on the project in their fulfillment of their degree requirements and will be funded by the Research Contractor (Paulete Poitras and Jenelle McArthur). This opportunity helps build student’s research capacity.

WHAT IS INVOLVED?

The following will take place:

- Individuals (including parents and students) who could be interviewed will be identified and names provided to the researcher for interviewing purposes
- Collection of relevant demographic data
- Observation of Kids & Cats Program and activities
- Interviews with Kids & Cats Program staff, students (former and present), parents, Elders (if applicable) and administrators to
document their experience and hear their perceptions of the program model.

- Determine the types of collection of various data related to student use of the centre.
- Documentation of specific strategies used for student supports.
- Collect data that shows increase in attendance due to the program and/or increased graduation rates or student performance (to be provided by administration).
- Document how, if any, the Kids & Cats Program reflects the seven foundational guiding principles Indigenous for educational practice.

➢ There will be no remuneration for participating in this research.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

The direct benefits of participating in this study include:

- The ability to voice concerns and hopes about the Kids & Cats Program and the learning that may come from gaining new insights and perspectives;
- The sharing of resources on challenges, solutions and positive outcomes; and
- The opportunity to have your voice heard, your opinions valued and respected.

For the larger scientific community and the community at large, this research may offer insights into the types of programming needed to address the needs of Indigenous students.

MINIMAL RISKS

There also may be minimal risks associated with participation as some individuals could experience psychological risks or social risks related to voicing their opinion in a group setting. Care will be exercised if there are issues that need follow up. If deemed necessary, individuals will be provided with names of people who could most appropriately sort through any issues.
CONFIDENTIALITY

In the research gathering session, all the information you provide will be considered confidential. Prior to starting the session you will be asked to sign a confidentiality agreement to indicate that you will respect the confidentiality of the interviewed discussion.

In written reports of this research and oral presentations, excerpts from the research may be discussed but no names will be associated with any quotes. This helps us to represent your voice and opinion without compromising your confidentiality. The audiotapes will only be used for the purpose of creating written records and will not be associated with your name. These audiotapes/computer video files will be kept in locked filing cabinets/secure password protected computers and will only be viewed by the researchers and research assistants who have signed confidentiality agreements.

Data collected during this study will be kept for five years and stored in locked filing cabinets. All data will be confidentially shredded or destroyed after seven years unless phases of the research are still occurring. Only the researchers and research assistants will have access to the data. All individuals who have access to the data will sign confidentiality agreements.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. It is very important to us that you decide whether or not you would like to share your thoughts with us.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in professional journals, presented at conferences and on Indspire’s website. Feedback about this study will be mailed to you if you choose to provide your address. The results will be
available June 30, 2016. If you have any questions at any point during the study, or after the study please contact (Sonia Prevost-Derbecker at Indspire by phone (519) 445-3024 or via email tmartin@indspire.ca)

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Carrie Bourassa at 306-519-1745 or infinityconsulting@sasktel.net. This proposal for the planned study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Indspire Ethics Committee. If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office (contact: Sonia Pervost-Derbecker at Indspire by phone (519) 445-3024 or via email tmartin@indspire.ca).

Thank you for your valuable insight in this research.

I hope you will agree to allow your child to be part of this exciting Nurturing Capacity project and as well, consider volunteering to be part of the study as we also welcome parental involvement.

Sincerely,

Carrie Bourassa, PhD
Owner/President
Infinity Consulting