

Working Together in New Ways for Social Impact in Dartmouth North

COVID-19 + SCHOOL CLOSURES:

Chromebooks + Internet Access for
Students in Dartmouth North

2020-2021



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This is a story of success about new ways of working together for positive social impact. With a goal of supporting students in remote learning, multiple players came together during a time of crisis to break down barriers to virtual access. Key conditions for success include building on existing cross-sectoral relationships of trust that have been intentionally developed over time, combined with the nimbleness of community-based organizations and the willingness of everyone involved to try something different together.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In March 2020, when the COVID-19 Pandemic arrived in Nova Scotia, schools closed and there was an unprecedented need to set up remote learning systems very quickly. This document captures the story and the learnings of a successful collective effort to support students during that time.

The story in these pages began with interviews of school administrators and Schools Plus staff involved. Findings were then shared with top provincial government representatives, Public Good Society (PGS) volunteers and Between the Bridges staff involved in the project. Feedback from these groups were incorporated to build out a more fulsome story of events.

Key Successes

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Internet access and devices were provided to those who needed them.

Increased digital inclusion.

Increased access to learning → increased student engagement → increased student learning.

IMPACT ON SCHOOLS & TEACHERS

Minimal loss of resources.

More efficient and effective communication between students and teachers.

Increased capacity with technology.

“*The access to learning was substantially enhanced by having Chromebooks¹.*”

IMPACT ON FAMILIES & COMMUNITY

Increased school family² wellness.

- Increased internet access & increased connectivity during isolation
- Decreased parental anxiety & increased trust

NARRATIVE SHIFT

Surfaced the concept of digital inclusion.

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Built and strengthened relationships:

- Between schools in the area.
- Between schools ↔ PGS and BtB.
- Between HRCE ↔ schools ↔ PGS and BtB.

Mobilized many different players in a short timeframe.

Identified individuals and families in need.

¹ HRCE made a regional purchase of Chromebooks, which is why that brand is specifically named, rather than using "laptops". Everyone in the school sector uses the term.

² A family whose child or children go to the schools discussed in this report.

Evidence of Success

3RD WAVE WAS EASY!

- All the systems, relationships, and processes were in place.

NARRATIVE SHIFTS & NEW NORMS

- From: 'You'll never get those computers back' to 'Access is everything.'
- From resource stockpiling to resource sharing.

FAMILIES & COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

- Families shared gratitude and demonstrated decreased anxiety.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

- "I feel proud that I was involved... That we saw the struggles and were able to work together to remove them."

Strategies & Conditions for Success

INVEST IN A SYSTEMS NAVIGATOR

- Cross-sector catalyst and navigator.
- Dedication, perseverance and positivity.
- Knowledge of the system and its players, and access to decision-makers.
- Existing trust and relationships.
- Resourced.

ASK THE QUESTION, START THE CONVERSATION

"The biggest roadblock is if you don't ask the question in the first place... People want to help, they just need to be approached and asked."

CREATE STRONG SYSTEMS & PROCESSES

- Gather the data
- Focus on safety.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS & TRUST WITH SCHOOL FAMILIES

"Instead of assuming the reasons why families were not participating in online learning, we actually connected with them."

START WITH A CLEAR COLLECTIVE VISION

Everyone involved knew how important internet access and devices were to the students and their learning.

“*The internet—I think it was an essential health and safety service that we were able to provide for the families of Dartmouth North.*”

“*The success of this project was only made possible by the absolute commitment of every person involved to try something different, that would support students in Dartmouth North. The focus of Between the Bridges in building relationships and making connections between the local and broader education system, and the community and families, served as a strong foundation for this initiative to move quickly and ultimately reduce barriers to learning for students and their families.*”

“*Two Chromebooks, that's it, two Chromebooks were actually broken at home... so it has been no loss of resources.*”



THE STORY

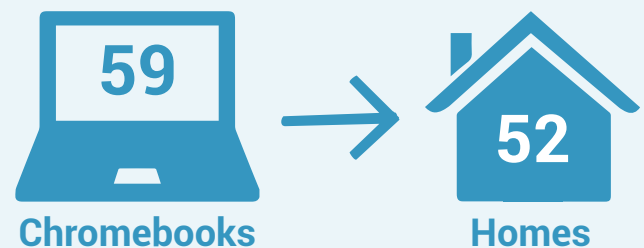
When the COVID-19 Pandemic arrived in Nova Scotia in March 2020, schools closed and there was an unprecedented need to set up remote learning systems very quickly. Immediately it became clear that anyone without home internet access and a proper device was excluded from information that was being shared via the internet, including access to teachers and curriculum. During this time, Between the Bridges' (BtB) backbone staff supported the development of a community response to digital exclusion which over time has become GEO Nova Scotia (Getting Everyone Online).

Using funds contributed by the Public Good Society of Dartmouth (PGS), Between the Bridges, United Way Halifax and Kiwanis Dartmouth, the GEO Project started by aiming to support students in the community who did not have home internet and/or a computer. However, the need for devices among Dartmouth North students was found to be much greater than GEO could meet, especially so quickly.

During ongoing conversations amongst partners to launch GEO for students and families, it was discovered that schools in Dartmouth North had plenty of Chromebooks in their buildings however they were inaccessible to students due to COVID-19 restrictions. There was also no established method for distributing them to students in the elementary and junior high schools or tracking them, as they had never gone home with students before.

Between the Bridges' backbone staff reached out to BtB network partners within the Halifax Regional Centre for Education (HRCE) and the provincial government to seek a solution. Together, through ongoing communication, and perseverance of all of the parties in the face of crisis, a strategy was developed. HRCE staff would retrieve the Chromebooks from the schools and hand them over to the Public Good Society, who would administer the requests and make deliveries to the families who needed them.

Privacy was a major concern, as the schools could not directly provide information about students or families to the Public Good Society. The GEO Project was already developing a referral process to address that issue, and through further engagement with local school representatives, a framework for referrals was developed that was in alignment with HRCE policy around privacy.



In total, 59 Chromebooks went to 52 different homes of students at two Dartmouth North elementary schools. The Chromebooks were on loan beginning in May 2020 and extending all the way to September 2020. The summer extension was created as principals recognized that with a COVID summer on the horizon (e.g., camps and events cancelled, social isolation) the need for access wasn't going to end with the school year.

From September 2020 to March 2021 Chromebook usage went back to the status quo, being used within classrooms and remaining at school. In April 2021 when the third wave of the pandemic hit Nova Scotia, schools were closed once more. Thankfully, the Chromebook process was in place. School administrators, teachers, parents and students had experience with transitioning from in-person to online. At this stage, the Public Good Society and Between the Bridges didn't need to be involved as systems were in place for the Chromebooks to once again go home with students for remote learning.

As this whole experience appeared to be such a success, as expressed by all parties, Between the Bridges wanted to explore the various aspects of this story in order to learn and grow from its example. The context is particularly interesting: navigating a complex system of organizations, institutions and relationships (school and education institutions) to solve a problem in a timely way during a time of crisis.

Gathering the Stories & Perspectives

The story in these pages began with informal interviews by the Learning and Evaluation Lead for Between the Bridges, using a Success/Evidence/Strategies (SES) structure, with:

- 3 school administrators from Harbour View Elementary, John MacNeil Elementary, and John Martin Junior High and
- 2 Schools Plus staff involved.

Findings were then shared with:

- 2 senior provincial government representatives,
- 1 Public Good Society (PGS) volunteer and
- 2 Between the Bridge's staff involved in the project.

Feedback from these groups were incorporated to build out a more fulsome story of events.

All quotes are anonymously shared from this set of conversations.



Key Successes

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

Internet access and devices were provided to those who needed them.

Students who needed it got access to Chromebooks and the internet. One individual shared an example of the situations that were improved through this project: "the girl who was doing her homework on her phone and her phone screen was broken... it was all smashed."

Increased digital inclusion.

"I feel like this project leveled the playing field, it was equitable."

This project allowed movement towards a more level playing field and created opportunity for equity for students in the neighbourhood, who are living with a diversity of socio-economic barriers.

Increased access to learning → increased student engagement → increased student learning.

"The access to learning was substantially enhanced by having Chromebooks."

Having the Chromebooks and access to the internet enhances access to learning because of the amount of information that can be received in an efficient way - it's instantaneous. The alternative approach was sending home physical work packages and books, however the printing process and the logistics were a barrier. With the Chromebooks and internet access, teachers were able to reach students who were not attending.

IMPACT ON SCHOOLS & TEACHERS

Minimal loss of resources.

"We lose Chromebooks on a daily basis here at school... with just drops and everything else."

"Two Chromebooks, that's it, two Chromebooks were actually broken at home... so it's been no loss of resources."

Compared to the fears that were initially identified, there was very little loss of resources at each school. In the case of one school, only 2 Chromebooks were broken and replaced over a 3 month period, demonstrating that the damages were less than with Chromebooks used at school.

More efficient and effective communication between students and teachers.

When asked about successes, one individual said

"the speed and efficiency... sending and receiving information."

By moving all communication online over email, and no longer relying on paper, teachers are now able to consistently have meaningful interaction with learners. For example, students and teachers can access each other in a quick way by sending an email with a question about homework or to arrange a meeting, whereas previously students would have to wait longer to get support with homework.

Increased capacity with technology.

"I look at my staff... I'm looking at the things they're currently doing online that they didn't know how to do... they didn't know it existed 12 months ago. So they have grown so much in their capabilities."

Students and teachers grew significantly through the process in terms of how to use the Chromebooks, navigate online tools and how to seek out help to troubleshoot. Families also became more familiar and comfortable with it, after initially wanting to stick with pen and paper. Folks were supported to move past the intimidation of technology.

IMPACT ON FAMILIES & COMMUNITY

Increased school family³ wellness.

Increased internet access & increased connectivity during isolation:

"The internet, I think it was an essential health and safety service that we were able to provide for the families of Dartmouth North."

Families with students had access to the internet that otherwise couldn't get it. Internet access emerged as an essential health and safety service during COVID-19 that was extended for the family.

Decreased parental anxiety:

"The parents' anxiety level has... decreased and students' anxiety level has decreased because they're still connected."

School administrators observed that parental anxiety decreased because students were still connected to the school, their teachers and their friends. As the 3rd wave hit, parents knew what to do if they were without access or devices because the systems were in place.

Increased trust:

"It was such a success that it continued to instill trust in the community."

Trust had been built during the 1st wave, so parents felt safe asking for support, trusting that they would be received without judgement.

³ Wellness of families whose child/ren go to the school.



NARRATIVE SHIFT

Surfaced the concept of digital inclusion.

"We made a decision... to identify internet and technology as necessary, as essential, not just to complete schoolwork, but to be up to date with the pandemic information and all that stuff."

Through this experience, access to the internet and technology has been identified as essential for so many things in society, such as accessing virtual health care and information, seeking employment and reducing social isolation. It has now become a social determinant of health.

SYSTEMS CHANGE

Built and strengthened relationships:

Between schools in the area. New relationships were built between school administrators and collaboration was strengthened between the schools. For example if a student from School A had a sibling at School B, the schools collaborated to make sure their needs were met collectively.

Between schools ↔ PGS and BtB. For some, this was a first introduction to PGS and BtB and they feel very happy to have established these new relationships and anticipate being able to help more families in the school community going forward.

Between HRCE ↔ schools ↔ PGS and BtB. The project strengthened relationships in the education system, where there is now more trust and shared goals of taking action in the best interests of the students. One individual from HRCE said one success was:

"...the relationships with the principals in the North End Dartmouth schools. It was great... to be communicating with them, was good for us, building those relationships."

Mobilized many different players in a short timeframe.

"It took a lot of different partnerships, and individuals to be involved to bring an idea, a simple idea to actual fruition and it happened fairly quickly."

One individual shared that

"...there was a lot of work done, and we had to come together quickly to make it happen fast."

Identified individuals and families in need.

One administrator noted that through this time, families and individuals in the community that could benefit from internet access were identified, combined with the awareness that internet access is crucial in today's society beyond education and COVID-19. Thus, schools have a basis they can continue to work from, and be tuned into who needs access.



EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

3RD WAVE WAS EASY!

- **All the systems, relationships, processes were in place** and we were more effective and efficient than the first time around. Some minor logistical pieces were needed, but aspects like liability, communicating with families, keeping track of usage and problem solving were sorted. *"We really streamlined the process and it meant that... during... the third wave, we jumped right into it."*
- One administrator shared a **feeling of relief** during the 3rd wave: *"I'm glad that what we did worked [during the 1st wave]... we didn't have to re-think and we had enough Chromebooks... when we were told we had to pivot to online learning we felt like 'We got this!'"*
- One school administrator shared that during the first wave student engagement was around 40%, compared with 92% of students logging on within 2 days of the third wave school shut-down. This demonstrates that students who were not logging on, were now doing so. The system was set up, students had been trained how to use the Chromebooks and teachers were ready with Google Classroom.

NARRATIVE SHIFTS & NEW NORMS

- **From: "You'll never get those computers back" to "Access is everything"** At the beginning, there was some negativity—for example: you'll never see those computers again; they'll get destroyed; families will take advantage of the technology and internet access to do anything but school—but now the narrative has changed to "access is everything!"
- **"Sharing resources** like Chromebooks or assistive technology is becoming **more of the norm.**"
- Change in collective mindset regarding the sharing of resources, **from resource stockpiling by teachers and schools to resources sharing.** *"I... care about my kids, I care about my families', you know, and there's been a shift away from that, we're looking at how we can better the system."*
- Starting to question **"What else is possible?"** With such big shifts in mindset through this time, teachers and administrators are asking *"What other gains could be made if we simply accessed different perspectives when trying to solve problems?"*

FAMILIES & COMMUNITY EXPERIENCES

- Staff in other communities commented on how lucky Dartmouth North was to have PGS and BtB. More students were connected to the internet and Chromebooks in a timely way because of the support.
- One school administrator shared:

"I had parents that called me up to thank me for the opportunity to participate in the project." Families shared their gratitude for no longer having to use public wifi or rely on neighbours (e.g., sitting outside their doors or houses to do homework).

- School administrators witnessed parent's anxiety level decrease because their children were still connected to the school and their friends.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Some interviewees shared feelings of pride, gratitude and an overall positive experience of being involved in this collaborative project.

"I feel proud that I was involved... I saw the struggles and I saw barriers... we were able to work together to remove them."

- Feeling **gratitude** to be working with this community and fortunate to be a part of something so positive. Feeling happy to support anything in the future.
- Feeling **very positive.** Enjoyed sharing the story with staff and the School Advisory Council.



STRATEGIES & CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

“ They [PGS and BtB] worked all those pieces out logistically and jurisdictionally and legally and... who was doing what... That kind of commitment to community and creativity and responsiveness and nimbleness and innovation is so, so important, and it really made a difference for some very vulnerable people last year. And, you know that has a big ripple effect, that when people are not excluded from what's happening in the world, when they can log in, when kids can go to school, people can... even learn to do their banking online or connect with a friend and go to bingo online... whatever it is, there's so many ways that that was important at the time and it has a big ripple effect. ”

INVEST IN A SYSTEMS NAVIGATOR

“I think groups like Between the Bridges are essential.”

- **Cross-sector catalyst and navigator:** A nimble and responsive group that can identify areas of concern, do problem solving and have enough leverage to put things into action across sectors. PGS and BtB were fundamental in bridging community ↔ schools ↔ HRCE. “Community partners can be responsive and fast... it was really important... having the nimbleness of the Public Good Society.” Individuals interviewed shared that there needed to be a group outside of HRCE and the schools: “I think that was the catalyst... it needed to be outside of the school.”
- **Existing trust and relationships:** From BtB's inception in 2017, it began building relationships in both the local and central school system. It was these relationships of trust and shared understanding of intention, that held together through the challenges of finding a solution.
- **Dedication, perseverance and positivity:** “[The PGS volunteer] stayed positive, [they] rallied everybody together, and just being really patient and believing in that vision.” It was important to have people who were motivated to follow through during such a chaotic time with many unknown risk factors: “we were all told ‘no’ many times.”
- **Knowledge of the system and its players, and access to decision-makers:** “So in order to get through all of those hurdles you have to know... which individuals we need to talk to.” Knowledge of the community, different layers of government and what they do, and the many different moving parts that are involved. Knowing which individuals you have to talk to and having people at a table who have access to decision makers.
- **Resourced:** Volunteers and staff with The Public Good Society and Between the Bridges had more time and resources when the Pandemic hit, because their regular activities stopped, whereas others in the school system sped up. They were able to redirect funding to put towards internet access and were able to leverage other funding sources.

ASK THE QUESTION, START THE CONVERSATION

"The biggest... roadblock is... not asking those questions in the first place... People want to help, they just need to be approached and asked."

- Many questions were brought forward and navigated up the ladder of influential stakeholders with positive and productive engagement from everyone every step of the way. (i.e., school administrators working within their reporting structures).

CREATING SYSTEMS AND PROCESSES

- **Organized systems and processes:** There was a lot of work at the very beginning to set norms, guidelines and organized processes that would ensure the safety and privacy of students and staff. Everything was transparent.
- **Data:**

"The very first thing we had to do was gather the data."

Teachers called or emailed every single family in their class to understand what the needs were. In the new school year, HRCE has put a section in the registration form which makes it easy to collect the data.

- **Safety:** Focusing on safe processes, for example, getting the physical Chromebooks, cleaning them and safely getting them to the families.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS & TRUST WITH SCHOOL FAMILIES

- **Speaking directly with families:**

"Instead of assuming the reasons why families were not participating in online learning, we actually connected with them."

- **Follow-through on promises:**

"I had parents call me up and say they were so happy to get what they were promised."

START WITH A CLEAR COLLECTIVE VISION

- Because everyone involved shared a collective vision, a lot of influence was exerted in a short period of time. Every person, at every step of the way, knew how important internet access and devices were to the students and their learning.



LOOKING AHEAD: IDEAS & QUESTIONS

CHROMEBOOKS GOING FROM SCHOOL TO HOME.

One administrator expressed a dream of each student having a school Chromebook full time:

"I think, [it] would be incredible if someday the kids all had Chromebooks in their home so that... they could do homework; they could email their teacher if they needed help; they could be connected with their friends online in a positive, healthy way. Yeah, I guess that would be the dream, someday in the future."

TECHNOLOGY UPDATE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY LEARNER.

"...even when we're back in school and learning returns to a form of normalcy, there will be a lot more integrated technology pieces in the learning because we know that the 21st century learner is... engaged... and interested with technology... I think we learned throughout this process, how to grow as educators and use that technology to our advantage."

Post-COVID-19 there will be more integrated technology in the school environment and learning because of going through this process. This presents many opportunities such as: What high-leverage activities can we explore/try to incorporate? How can we grow as educators in this field? How can we support students learning under different circumstances? For example,

"if somebody misses a day... because they're not feeling well or they get a surgery or medical procedure or whatever, it might be that the impact on learning might be minimized by having access to technology."

ADMINISTRATION TURNOVER AND SUCCESSION PLANNING.

Ensuring there are processes in place to transition the information and the relationships so that the new administrators know what the project is, who the collaborators are, and how the process works. Wanting to ensure that students are equipped and have access when they need it, by maintaining and improving the systems as new staff come in.

STRENGTHENED RELATIONSHIPS.

Based on the strengthened relationship between HRCE, the schools of Dartmouth North, BtB and PGS, what other collaborations are possible looking forward?

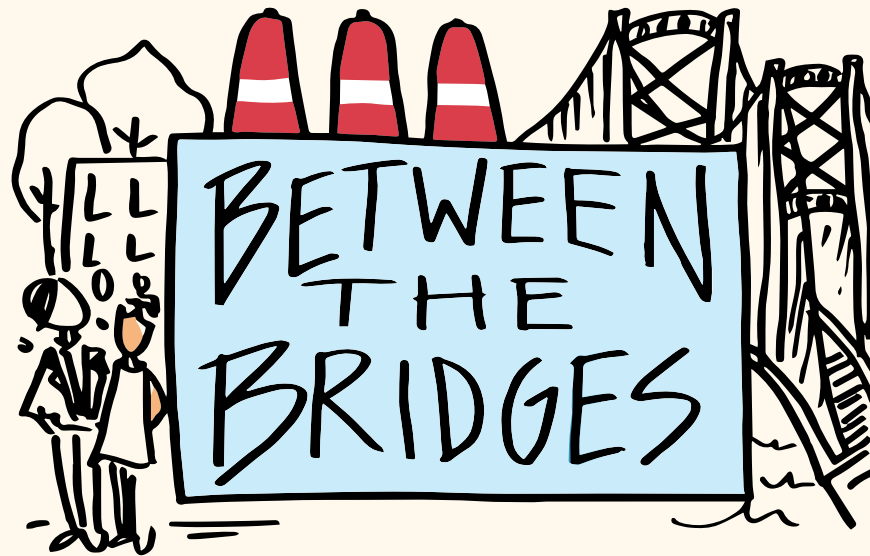
DIGITAL INCLUSION IN THE COMMUNITY, BEYOND EDUCATION AND COVID-19.

"It was just a great opportunity to be able to identify individuals in our community who benefit from technology and internet access and... get them that access because... this situation goes beyond education and beyond COVID-19. I think that access to the internet, and having a device that can access the internet is crucial in today's society."

COVID-19 has been an opportunity to identify individuals in the community that benefit from access to the internet and devices. Now that this human right has been named, it's something that must continue by staying tuned into who needs it and how access and support can be facilitated.

MINDSET SHIFT: NOW THAT WE'VE MOVED BEYOND THE STATUS QUO, WHAT ELSE IS POSSIBLE?

Being a part of such an incredible project that came together quickly in a time of crisis opens up possibilities of what else can be done together. How can actors and resources be mobilized around problems not in times of crisis? What more could be done for our kids? What next?



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