



Evaluation Report

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Background – WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT THEY DO

The Horse Connection Inc., is a unique effort aimed at keeping ‘at risk’ young people in school. The intentions and activities developed 16 years ago, out of an original Applied Counselling project at the University of Manitoba. By 2002, it had grown into a structured and formally funded program working directly with a number of schools in the Pembina Trails School Division.

The programming operates as an Equine Alternate Learning (E.A.L.) to provide alternative forms of learning and growth for young people. The Horse Connection has as its formally stated mission to: *provide an educational horseback riding program, together with public schools, that empowers students to stay connected with their education.*

The programming is seen to be unique in terms of its overall approach and actions. Uniqueness comes from the fact that The Horse Connection does, in fact, use horses as an instrumental tool and co-facilitator in support of fostering growth of life skills, self-awareness, personal development and connection to the school within the participants. At the same time, the process of learning to care for and ride a horse is expected to boost practical capacity and individual skills.

The delivery of the programming has been organized around a number of related objectives, including:

- To provide an opportunity for young people to develop mentally, emotionally and socially through association with others.
- To develop in young people responsibility, initiative, cooperation, and other characteristics which promote better citizenship.
- To provide an opportunity for young people to associate with one another in a meaningful way.
- To gain a deeper appreciation and increased knowledge of animals & nature through the association of handling and riding the horse.
- To foster a greater interest in further education and its benefits.
- To expose young people to real life and challenging experiences so that they will be more adequately prepared to face adulthood.
- To develop abilities in leadership and decision-making and to build one's self-confidence.
- To promote the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings.

At the same time, the program also works to develop direct skills in the care and riding of horses, organized around four (4) objectives:

- To develop knowledge in equine behaviour, horse psychology and equine wellness.
- To develop an understanding, increased knowledge of horse management practices and safety precautions.
- To develop the skill of patience, expressing empathy, genuineness and respect while learning to handle and ride a horse.
- To develop the skill of verbal and non-verbal communication, body language and the herd dynamics of the horse.

For the past several years, the programming has been offered within six (6) schools in the Pembina Trails School Division with a combination of fall, winter and spring scheduled set of sessions. During this last school year (2010 – 2011) The Horse Connection expanded services into an additional four (4) schools within the same division.

The classes are held at a local riding stable relatively close to area schools. A full set of classes consists of twenty (20) lessons arranged for either full mornings or afternoons (each lesson takes approximately one-half day including transportation to and from the stables by The Horse Connection). The classes are divided into two sets of 10 week sessions. Some students begin in fall sessions (October) and continue in winter or in spring; some students begin in winter and continue into the spring session. Scheduling occurs in relation to the numbers coming from the respective schools, transportation issues, etc.

The program operates with a referral of students from the participating schools, based on information / criteria provided by The Horse Connection. Information provided to the schools includes primary information on why the referral is being made; what is expected of the programming in relation to the students; whether the student has any conditions that could impact on their participation; and, permission forms for parents as well as medical forms from student's physicians. All forms and permissions must be forwarded to The Horse Connection prior to final acceptance.

For those students that are referred, The Horse Connection staff then meet with the students to gather and provide more information, and to gain a sense of why the student wants to participate. From two to four students per school are generally referred, and accepted up to a maximum of 32 participating students in total. The program is delivered through three part time staff positions, and an additional five volunteers enabling a maximum of four students per session (morning and afternoon).

During this past school year, with the expansion into additional schools, a total of 34 students were referred and accepted into the program. One student withdrew prior to the classes, citing fear of the animals as the reason. Another student did not physically attend any of the classes because they could not obtain a medical form in time. Of the remaining 32 students: three others withdrew after 1 – 3 classes with reasons attributed to fear; one pulled out indicating that the time away from school classes was putting him behind; and another withdrew without a reason stated. The program withdrew one student citing negative behaviours, while the schools withdrew two students due to lack of attendance in their school classes.

Therefore, a total of 24 students completed the program this past school year, with participation rates nearly perfect (for graduates). In addition, while specific data was not maintained, many of the school personnel clearly indicated that participating students would work very hard to be at school the days of the program, even if their attendance was otherwise not strong.

Operating costs for this year have been spread between the Pembina Trails School Division and participating schools, RBC, Manitoba Community Services Council, the Manitoba Metis Federation, The Winnipeg Foundation Youth In Philanthropy (VIP) Tec Voc Committee, the Thomas Sill Foundation, as well as on-going fund raising and many hours of in-kind services.

This past year, funds were received from The Winnipeg Foundation to undertake a strategic / business planning exercise, and to develop and implement a comprehensive evaluation in support of future sustainability and fund raising.

The evaluation was to be undertaken during the 2010 – 2011 school year, ending with this final report in June / July of 2011. The overall evaluation approach and process is explained in greater detail below.

Evaluation Approach, Process and Tasks

Over this past year, an evaluation has been attached to The Horse Connection programming. The intent of the evaluation was to:

- Identify and describe the type of changes experienced by participating students as a result of their involvement in the program;
- Create a better understanding of what works within the program and why (facilitate a focus on program strengths and capacity); and,
- Support the means by which The Horse Connection Inc., can continue to assess their process (internally) with the development of tools and overall capacity built during this current evaluation.¹

¹ Note: Where a specific form or tool has been developed and is being provided to The Horse Connection for their future use, it's file title is identified and documented in (*italics*) within the relevant paragraph of this report.

Essentially, the evaluation concentrates on the measurement of change. Particular reference has been given to life skills and the ability of students to remain connected to school. The evaluation has been conducted under acknowledgement that these type of changes occur in small steps, and that there are numerous factors that can impact on change in the lives of the students. The evaluation has, therefore, sought to measure change, and to identify and assess the relationship between the efforts of the programming, and its capacity to bring about the type of changes that are desired.

Overall, the evaluation approach has been highly *participatory* in nature, utilizing feedback from those that are most directly involved in the programming. Given that this participatory process is outcome directed and somewhat subjective in nature, the evaluation process has taken steps to *balance* this subjectivity through discussions with samples of different stakeholders (students, staff, schools and representatives of the school division), so that a composite picture of findings has resulted.

The evaluation also focused on the *relationship* between the approach and actions within The Horse Connection and the changes in the participating students, in order to identify which actions and supports contribute most strongly, and which could benefit from adjustment. In this manner, the evaluation provides information that will make it possible to learn more about the efforts of the program, and how the E.A.L. approach helps to create better situations for those students that are involved. In addition to identifying *what* happens within the program, this assessment will also be able to determine *why* the program's approach and actions are successful.

Evaluation work has not been done in isolation, but rather, with involvement in ways that was intended to build future capacity to undertake internal assessment. Tools have been developed and processes are suggested that will remain within the project for use to continue to learn and evaluate the functions and relationship building that occurs.

There were three related sets of tasks that were undertaken within the evaluation:

- The *initial stage* of the evaluation process involved the design of a specific evaluation framework. This occurred with initial input from staff and participating students as well as some school resource personnel. The framework has been used as an overall guide for the assessment and identifies the key immediate indicators of progress and success, along with the ways that the evaluation would track information.

The results of these initial discussions were used to generate an overall *evaluation logic model* and *matrix* that summarizes the work of the programming and the expectations that are held of it, and creates an understanding of the information to be gathered and the questions that will be answered through the evaluation.

From this information, an overall line of questioning was designed, along with the information gathering tools needed to gather information from the various sources. This included guides for the interviews / discussion circles with students, school staff, and program staff / volunteers, as well as a brief electronic survey for school staff.

At the onset of the evaluation, a specific information gathering tool was developed, termed a learning wheel. This type of instrument has been utilized effectively by *Leskiw and Associates* in other situations to assist in gaining feedback directly from the participating students. Given the ages of the students and their varying degrees of participation, the learning wheel format was significantly modified into a single *before and after* relationship form. This form (*Student Self Assessment*) enables students to identify what they felt and where they were upon entering the program, and again, upon completion of their sessions.

The form adds additional detail to the information gathered from the students within brief discussion circles. As noted, this *Student Self Assessment* form will remain with The Horse Connection as a tool for future assessments.

The simple form enables participating students to express themselves in terms of:

- ✓ Changes in the level of confidence and self-esteem;
- ✓ Changes in specific life skills;
- ✓ Increases in the capacity and ability of participants to gain personal power and control over their specific situations; and,
- ✓ Growing recognition of one's personal gifts.

- The **second stage** of activities involved determination of preliminary measures as to where the students are *beginning from* within their journey and changes. In essence this forms the *pre* part of overall pre and post participation investigations. Information was gathered from program staff and the school staff who give their perspectives on where the student(s) are at, why they were referred into the program, and what changes were expected as a result of the programming. This information gathering took place prior to both, the fall and winter sessions to create base line information from which individual change could be gauged.²
- The **third stage** of the assessment occurred as a repeat of stage 2, with a focus on changes that could be identified by program and school staff, and the students themselves.

Information was gathered from the students themselves (**Student Self Assessment** form and discussion circles with each of the classes), The Horse Connection staff and volunteers, and a sample of teaching / resource staff from participating schools. School staff were offered three vehicles for providing their feedback: in-person interviews; telephone interviews; and a brief electronic survey.

- The **final stage** of work represents the preparation and presentation of a final report. All information gathered over the past year has been documented within this final report, organized around the following:
 - ✓ The changes that have been experienced by the groups of participating students, with a particular emphasis on life skills and those that support continued connections to school;
 - ✓ The relationship of the actions of the program and its approach to the changes that have been identified;
 - ✓ Program strengths that can be built on and any identified limitations that may need to be addressed;

² It should clearly be noted that this assessment of the situations of each of the students is not intended to be seen as a judgement or gauge of individual students. All information is confidential and no names are documented. The intent is to provide indications of the overall changes that the collective group of students experienced over time.

- ✓ Lessons that have been learned from the program approach and process.

Throughout the current year's term, considerable effort was also made to develop forms and charts that would assist The Horse Connection to strengthen its organizational capacity, and lighten the administrative load of the staff. It is recognized that this is primarily a volunteer run program and that any time / effort that can be saved from administrative detail ultimately benefits the students. These tools are included as part of this evaluation report as separate files (Word and Excel).

It should be noted that strong cooperation has been received from the administration of the Pembina Trails School Division. Access was obtained on information about participating students, as well as support in seeking approval for participation from parents, and school staff time for interviews. Over the course of the evaluation a total of seven staff from the participating ten schools participated in, in person, or telephone surveys, the majority of these engaged in discussions at the beginning and end of their student's sessions. They represent 21 of the 32 total students engaged in the program over the course of the school year (completed and withdrawn).

In addition, discussions and the *Student Self Assessment* form were obtained directly from a total of 18 students, and the parents of two of the overall group of students did not wish for them to participate in the evaluation. The evaluation also interviewed a group of senior administrators at Pembina Trails School Division at the outset of the evaluation, and re-interviewed two of the Division's senior guidance / career staff, who have extensive experience with the program, at the end of this school year. Discussions were held with program staff / volunteers at the commencement of each of the 20 week terms, and upon their completion, to gain specific before and after observations.

Thank you to those that provided their valuable feedback and wisdom.

Findings

Characteristics of Participating Students

The program considers referrals of students from Grades 6 – 9. Generally this is seen as an appropriate age group. However, some difficulties are evident with Grade 9 students not wanting to miss time in school as their academic work becomes more demanding, and the scheduling of The Horse Connection classes (full morning or afternoon) means that more subjects may be missed. (For one student who has been coming to The Horse Connection program for three years, a Grade 10 credit in community volunteering is being developed to allow her to continue with the program while meeting school requirements).

This year one Grade 5 student participated in the classes with considerable success. Overall, school and program staff do not feel that there are any impediments to having Grade 5 students participate. The over-riding consideration is that the individual student is large enough to physically ride and care for the horse and the riding tack (particularly the western saddle).

In order to identify and understand the changes that were experienced by students as a result of their participation in the program, it is important to have solid understanding of the characteristics and situations of those students. While each student is unique, the majority tend to share a number of attributes and behaviours that influence the extent to which the program is suitable for them.

Some of the most common and evident characteristics are:

- Young people that would feel special by being part of something as unique as learning to ride.
- Students who do not appear to be finding success on a number of fronts: academically, socially or emotionally.
- Diagnosis with symptoms such as autism, ADHD or Asperger's Syndrome are quite common, along with others facing depression, anxiety and other conditions that fall within the definition of 'mental health issues' according to Mental Health Canada.
- Students who exhibit little or no empathy for others, and / or limited knowledge for and respect of personal (physical or emotional) boundaries.

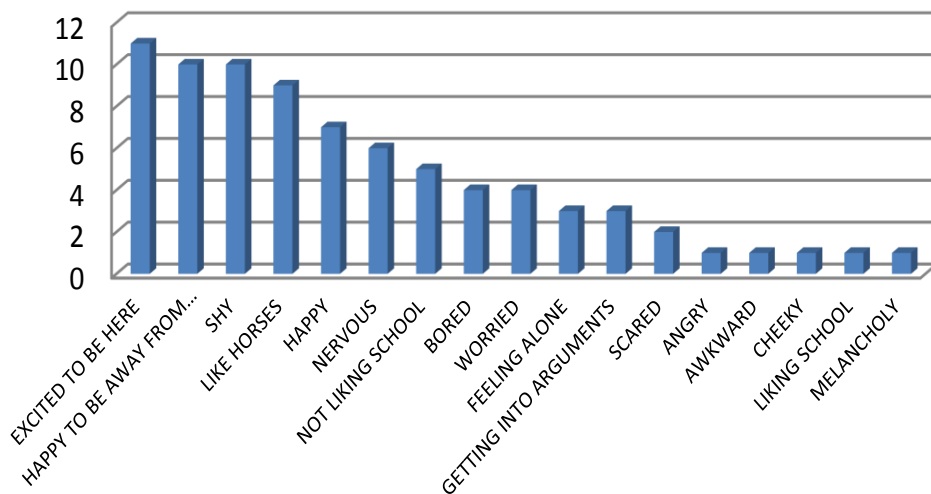
- Most students do not have a peer network around them and can find it hard to make and retain friends.
- Young people who have difficulty dealing with situations of stress (assignments, class presentations, etc.) and will repeatedly act out or shut down emotionally.

Perhaps the key quality that can be used to describe most of the students who end up participating well within the program, is that they tend to be disconnected: from peers, classroom work, and overall socialization. Terms such as: *walks to their own beat* or, *lost soul*, or *loner* were heard repeatedly from several of the teachers and resource staff at the schools. There can be the feeling that they may be on the verge of not being in school. Disconnection or the propensity towards it, or even connection to negative connections (peers and situations) appears to be the singularly most common characteristic across the participating students.

The program is best suited for the child that needs something different that cannot be offered within the existing programs at the school. The Horse Connection is seen as something out of the ordinary.

Recognition is also needed of how the participating students themselves describe themselves (before they entered The Horse Connection programming). The following chart illustrates the number of responses for each of the statements within the *Self Assessment* form:

Before I came to The Horse Connection, I was...



Students participating in the program were well motivated (“excited to be here”) and clearly noting that they liked / loved horses. Personal motivation is important to their eventual success. Most students also indicated that they were happy to be away from school.

While many indicated that they were generally happy, a larger number stated that they were shy. A number of students stated that they did not like school, while one noted that she did. Several others felt that they were nervous about the new opportunity, while several others felt alone. Other primary emotions that were noted included: worry; fear; and awkwardness. Single responses included: melancholy; cheekiness; and anger.

Students were referred into the program for a variety of reasons. In some schools this program is seen as simply an interesting alternative to be tried. In others, with more experience with The Horse Connection, referrals are made for students who need an alternative to the classroom to enable them to remain better connected to their school.

The most frequently noted reasons for referral are:

- Students who are lacking self-confidence or self-esteem and could benefit from activities that they can be successful in.
- Students who can benefit from opportunities to take pride in what they have accomplished. Related to this is the opportunity for them to feel special by having developed special skills.
- Providing something for the students to connect to and engage with that is fun and rewarding, and has the potential to keep the students connected to the school (connection to a school sponsored activity is equated to connection back to the school).

In order to ensure that as strong an understanding as possible is available to schools and parents, an informational / promotional document has been developed, and is attached as a separate file, The Horse Connection *A Brief Primer*, for use in supporting the future referral processes.

Changes Evident in Participating Students

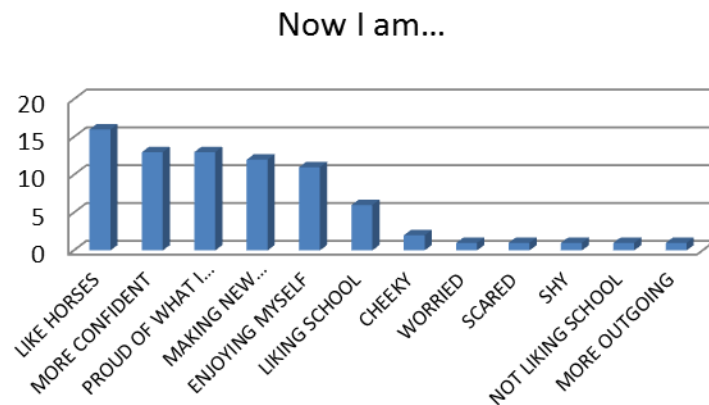
Changes within the aptitudes and behaviours of participating students occurs in small steps. It becomes the collection of small steps that makes the changes noticeable. Not all students exhibit the same intensity of change, nor do all experience the same changes. The intent of the programming is not to singularly bring about major differences within the participating students, but rather, to help work to empower the students and support them to remain engaged with school. As a result, the evaluation sought information from the program staff, school teachers / resource staff and from the students themselves with respect to those factors that increase the potential for continued connection to school. The information gathered provides consistent indications of a number of defining changes within the students.

It is acknowledged that no singular support program can bring about major changes, equally, within all students, and that there are a number of other factors such as school supports, family stability and student maturity that support or limit the extent of change. However, the adults associated with the program and the students believe that The Horse Connection efforts directly contribute to positive change, and cite the following changes as being most evident:

- The most universal change is seen to be a noticeable ***increase in self-confidence and self-esteem***. All of the students that complete at least the first ten week component of the program show greater confidence as a result of working with a large animal and achieving many small successes along the way. This confidence tends to build with increased time in the program.
- The second most noticeable change in students is their ***pride of accomplishment***. The learning, growing, practical skill development and ability to eventually direct the movements of their horses reflects a direct increase in personal capacity for which most students are very proud.
- Related to overall pride in accomplishments is the belief that the students exhibit more ***personal pride at being good at something*** that distinguishes them from their peers. Many feel special to have been selected for the program. Often, the ability to persevere even when fear or difficulties are experienced, is a primary reason for such pride.
- Students are also seen to value and benefit from ***being part of something*** and having the opportunity to ***connect to something positive*** in their lives. As part of this there is an apparent reduction in isolation for many of the students through the group dynamics that occurs over the weeks of classes. ***Friendships develop.***

- Many students also show several smaller changes over time, including:
 - ✓ **Reductions in inappropriate behaviour**, particularly during The Horse Connection classes. It is believed that the students value the lessons which translated into the need to display more positive behaviours at school if they were to remain eligible for the program.
 - ✓ Students begin to take **more personal responsibility** for their actions. Students must, and do, keep up with their school assignments if they are to remain within The Horse Connection. Within the program responsibility grows through the grooming and care of the horses and equipment.
 - ✓ There appears to be an **overall increase in empathy** amongst the students. This empathy is first and foremost directed towards the horses, but tends to expand to others within their classes, and, in some instances to peers back at school. The trust that builds between student and horse often is seen to grow to include the adults in the program, and to others in their classes. The emotional safety that eventually results within the program settings has been seen to reflect positively on capacity to establish and maintain relationships.
 - ✓ Small changes in basic life skills have also been observed. These include **greater self-awareness** and increased use of **appropriate verbal / non-verbal communication skills**.

Students see changes in themselves as displayed on the following chart: (number of responses per statement displayed on the left of the graph)



- Liking / loving horses remains the over-riding source of motivation to continue in the program.
- Growth in self-confidence is high and strong.
- Students clearly note that they are proud of what they can now do, and state a belief that this sets them apart from others. They feel special and valued.
- They are making new friends which implies greater capacity for relationships, and a sense of connection with others.
- Some students note that they are still shy, and a few note that they are still shy, or that they are angry or scared.
- The number of those that now like school has grown from when they started the program.

Overall, the students that have participated this year within The Horse Connection are seen to be somewhat better equipped to continue on in school and to deal with personal situations. They are more confident and proud of who they are, and better able to establish and maintain relationships. While the connection to staying in school may not be direct, there is an overall perception that, because participation in the program is so highly valued, the subsequent connection between the program and the school is also of value.

The Work of The Horse Connection

At a basic level the program provides an opportunity for healthy recreation; to be in a non-urban setting with an animal that they would otherwise not normally associate with; and, participating in physical activity. In addition, participation in the program enables students to gain some basic skills in the care and riding of horses.

Horses are used as an *instrumental tool* and *co-facilitator* of The Horse Connection programming. The significance of this reflects the uniqueness of this opportunity for Pembina Trails students, and illustrates why the program is capable of engaging the types of students discussed above. The *connection* to the horses and the supports that are provided around this connection provides strength to the program actions.

A formalized, organized program of activities is undertaken within The Horse Connection in accordance with nationally certified standards. This program of learning and experiencing begins with basic theory (horses, safety practices, etc.); moves to practical skill development including the care of their horse and the related equipment; which grows into walking with and eventually riding their horse; and ends with learning how to take control over their emotions, body balance and coordination in order to effectively communicate with, and ride their horse.

Each of these four areas of training provides specific outputs:

- The theory enables students to understand what to expect and begin to learn how horses act and react;
- The practical element of initial learning provides the opportunity to build trust with the horse and to feel safer around them as a result. Connection with the horse begins at this point;
- The handling and riding element of learning empowers the students to learn verbal and non-verbal communications with their horses and begins to help them learn how to control the horse's movements;
- Finally, learning how to move from being a passenger on their horse to actually riding and controlling movement occurs as students become more skilled at directing their horses and the importance of having to work cooperatively with them.

Simply being around the horses (particularly for those students who love being near them) can be an anxiety reducer. Participation has been described as a diversion from their everyday lives and life issues, and being at The Horse Connection can leave students refreshed and energized.

In some ways, the horse acts as a safe surrogate for other humans. Relationships and connections with the horse can be easier and more straightforward than they are with other people. The horse acts as a mirror to the student's emotions. If the student is frustrated the horse's behaviour reflects this back to the student.

The horse does not have open-ended tolerance for inappropriate behaviour. Yelling or other aggression is not accepted. Students noted that the horses are very intuitive to their (student's) moods. When they are angry or tired the horses respond differently, and the students tend to adjust their behaviours accordingly. In addition, some of the students felt that being on different horses allowed them to learn about the different personalities of the horses, a skill that translates into dealing with different humans.

Learning new skills, primarily the leading and riding of the horses, but also including grooming and having to tack the horses and the routines that help deal with impatience and issues of personal responsibility (if a student does not groom and care for their horse they cannot ride). The skill development supports a growth in self-confidence and self-esteem. Small skills (tacking), gives small successes which can be built on, and has a positive impact on personal motivation.

Continued growth in skills, particularly in being able to direct the movements of a large animal build confidence and self-esteem. As much of the control over movement is non-verbal, students begin to experience, first-hand, the importance of non-verbal communications.

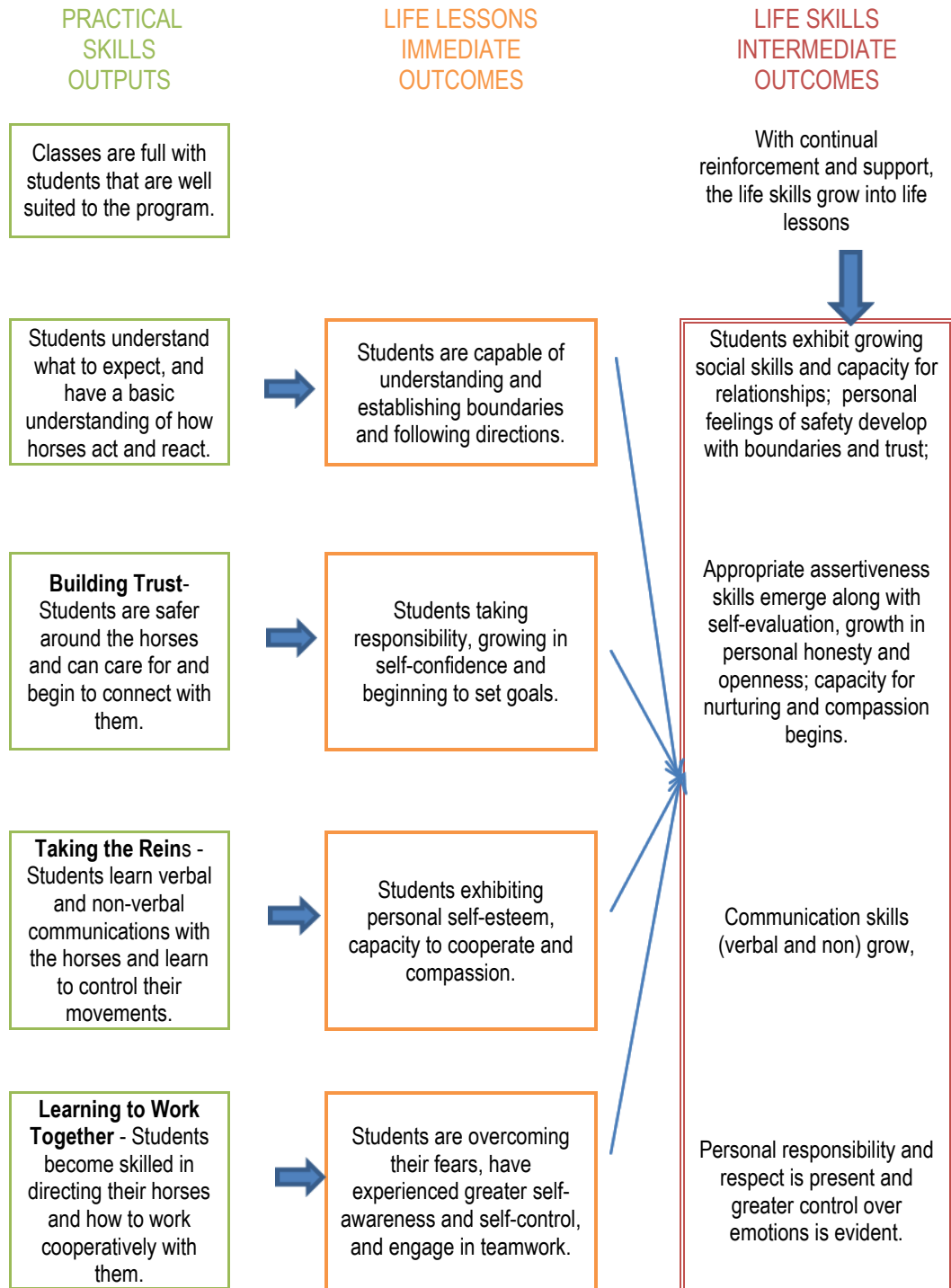
Equally important to the functions of the horses are the roles that are played by the program staff and volunteers. There is a high degree of positive role modeling; illustrating by word and action. There appears to be a consistent, gentle form of teaching that goes on to support learning about self and the situation around the student. At the same time, students know that there are limits, and that stepping over boundaries is not acceptable.

Staff and volunteers also enable relationships with adults who are neither family nor school based. Within the safe and focused situation of the classes, this enables students to receive guidance and advice from an adult that tends to be readily acceptable. It is evident to the participating students, as well as the teaching and resource staff within the schools / division, that the staff and volunteers at The Horse Connection are highly committed and passionate about what they are doing. This passion appears to transfer over to the students.

It should also be recognized that The Horse Connection programming works most effectively when it is seen as part of an overall support structure for the student. With greater understanding and experience about the program, resource teachers within the schools are better able to determine who may value most from participating, and what other supports and resources can work in harmony with The Horse Connection efforts. Stronger and more effective ways of working in closer cooperation could benefit both, the programming and the students.

It is important to acknowledge that participation in The Horse Connection is a process, not a set of singular events. Ideally students can have the opportunity to participate within the program for a period of three years. Over this time frame a number of immediate and intermediate outcomes are possible within participating students. These outcomes relate directly to the practical skills / outcomes that occur through the learning and experiences of the students.

The relationship of the practical skills / outcomes can best be illustrated within the following chart.



To further illustrate the impact that The Horse Connection is making, the following summary statements are presented to illustrate the extent to which the program is achieving its stated objectives.

Objective: To provide an opportunity for young people to develop mentally, emotionally and socially through association with others.

The program is showing itself to be a valued and beneficial opportunity for students to enhance their socialization, become more aware of themselves and begin to learn how best to control their emotions.

Objective: To develop in young people responsibility, initiative, cooperation, and other characteristics which promote better citizenship.

The evidence this year suggests that participating young people begin to develop greater responsibility for their actions and for the work that is required of them in the program. In addition, the value that the students place in being able to be in the program tends to translate into motivation to come to school (particularly during The Horse Connection days), and to keep up to date with school assignments.

Objective: To provide an opportunity for young people to associate with one and other in a meaningful way.

The majority of students clearly noted that they are making new friends as a result of the program classes. This opportunity to socialize reduces the overall isolation that is experienced by many of the participating students, however, this increased socialization / presence of new friends has not been seen by the school contacts.

Objective: To gain a deeper appreciation and increased knowledge of animals and nature through the association of handling and riding the horse.

Students do state that they have an increased knowledge about the horses and that they can translate this knowledge into a reduction in initial fear of the animals (for some students). Further, this knowledge is expressed as pride of their accomplishments.

Objective: To foster a greater interest in further education and its benefits.

While there are indications to suggest that The Horse Connection has created a greater value for school (given the association between the schools and the program), however, it is not possible to identify whether this will continue to foster on-going interest in further education from a time limited evaluation. Given the situations and factors affecting many of these students, fostering greater interest in school is expected to be difficult for any single support program.

Objective: To expose young people to real life and challenging experiences so that they will be more adequately prepared to face adulthood.

There were a number of comments made by school personnel, that being in the program provided students with opportunities to overcome fear and frustration, particularly some initial fear of large animals. The opportunity to work past challenges in a calm and supported manner is an element of the program that is seen to be a strength, and one that enables students to be nurtured towards stronger personal confidence.

Objective: To develop abilities in leadership and decision-making and to build one's self-confidence.

As noted above, the small successes that are achieved, as well as the means to overcome challenges within the program both serve to build confidence. A growth in personal confidence was a universal indicator of both adults and students associated with the program. For a limited number of students who have been in the program for extended periods of time (a full three years), evidence of leadership is also emerging through a desire to continue within the program as a volunteer or mentor function.

Even the opportunity for the student to *decide* not to continue with the program is seen by some resource staff as a strong point for the program. Being in control over one's situation (the decision to continue or not) can be viewed as a means of promoting personal decision-making and a step towards greater self-confidence.

Objective: To promote the ability to express one's thoughts and feelings.

Within the program class setting there has been a noticeable change in ability to communicate better. This often translates into talking rather than yelling, or increased capacity to pick up on non-verbal cues. Similar changes are less evident by the school contacts unless the student has completed at least two full years of the program.

Recommendations – What Lessons Have We Learned

Over the course of this past school year there have been a number of lessons that were learned, which can be used to strengthen the existing program, and may have a bearing on future programming of this type.

In summary, the key lessons that have been learned and how they apply, are as follows:

- Group dynamics is very important within the sessions. Those groups that remain together from the first to final lesson tend to show the clearest results. Peer support comes from familiarity amongst the group members, including time spent within the vehicle on the way to and from the sessions. Consistency amongst the groups facilitates peer support and socialization, and creates opportunities to build trust and friends.

Conversely, groups who introduce new members after several sessions may not develop the level of peer support that assists with the program approach. The Horse Connection policy that calls for no new students after the fourth class is seen to be appropriate and useful, even if student spaces are left vacant. In addition, having new students introduced into the sessions (requiring them to quickly catch up, or holding back on the learning of others in the group) is seen by the students as being frustrating.

- As a result, it is important that referrals are timely and appropriate in order to assist with the maintenance of a consistent group of students, and to ensure that the program is best suited for those that are referred.

The limited number of school / referring staff that have actually been to the stables and viewed (or participated) in the lessons have a much stronger understanding of the program and what it is intended to accomplish. They feel that this first-hand knowledge helps them to identify and refer the most suitable students.

Therefore, efforts that will strengthen the understanding of the program within the referring schools represent worthwhile efforts. Two key recommendations to assist with this have been put forth for consideration:

- ✓ A summary informational statement on the program has been developed through this evaluation. This statement takes the findings within the evaluation and integrates them with examples of the types of students who may have received the greatest benefit from participating.

The statement is attached as a separate file for use within the overall program information / promotion package (*A Brief Primer*).

- ✓ A secondary recommendation is to provide schools with greater opportunity to come out and experience the program first hand. While this may not be suitable for all staff, it was suggested that having an information experience at the stables would be of benefit. The session should be held in May to coincide with final lessons, and to facilitate the schools in thinking about referrals for the next year. This also provides an opportunity for school staff to discuss the program across schools and generate further ideas around referrals.

While it is acknowledged by the schools that it is important to be able to fill open spots in the program quickly (backfilling spots when referred students have either not taken their place in the program, or have – for a variety of reasons – left the program within the first couple of weeks, there are additional difficulties in being able to accommodate this. With the requirements for parental and / or medical consent forms, and the need to fully discuss the program with potential students, schools are very reluctant to identify students for *waiting lists*.

It is felt that there would be considerable frustration experienced by students / families if expectations are raised (there is the potential for admission in the program) and cannot be met (all spots are full). Given the emotional and behavioural factors facing many of the participating students, it is felt that by many of the schools that the students could be very negatively impacted if they are selected by the school for a waiting list, then not end up getting into the program. This is a risk that the schools are not wanting to take.

However, it can be expected that as the schools continue to grow in their knowledge of the program and the overall pool of referrals grows, that this issue may be reduced, but not fully eliminated.

- The overall referral process is viewed by most referral sources as appropriate and not onerous. Some resource staff indicated that a more fully electronic (email based) format may be more timely, however, this was not a consistently held opinion³. There are a number of elements of the process that were raised for consideration (or simply to point out where issues exist).

³ As a means of simplifying the format for referrals an electronic form has been developed and included within the evaluation process (*School Referral Form*). This format provides for electronic record keeping – with a subsequent reduction in overall administrative requirements.

- ✓ The medical forms, particularly the signoff by a physician, are the most difficult elements of the referral process to get completed. In some instances students may not have a family doctor, and / or obtaining an appointment can add considerable time to the referral process. It is not known if there is anything that can be done to reduce this issue (given overall liability issues), however, the medical forms were consistently raised as an issue.
- ✓ Parental consent forms were also noted as being difficult to obtain (or time consuming). In most instances, supportive parents get their forms back very quickly. At times, school staff are required to continually call with reminders. While it is recognized that the forms are essential, it is noted that they can add time to the referral process.

As a result of the potential for delays in forwarding fully completed referral forms / information, several schools discussed the timing of the fall classes, and whether any adjustments can be made.

- It is recognized that September and early October are extremely busy times at the schools. Therefore, a shift in the first fall classes until later in October would serve to assist the referral schools significantly. If the referrals could be made later (early to mid-October), this would allow for better information to be gathered on the students, and a more informed referral.

This is seen to be particularly important for those schools that serve as *feeder* schools (those that receive students from several elementary schools for junior high school). These feeder schools may or may not have good information on particular students who would be suitable for referral, and limited personal knowledge of the students by the referral sources.

- It is important to recognize that schools within Pembina Trails School Division operate with *student support teams*. These teams consist of a combination of guidance / resource personnel and classroom teachers. It is this group that is ultimately responsible for the referral, normally through a single representative of the group who serves as the primary contact for between the school and The Horse Connection. In several of the schools, the primary contact may or may not be the individual that suggests any given referrals, nor are they necessarily the case managers of the student's situation.

As a result, the contact person may not be in the best position to comment on the appropriateness of the specific referrals. It is, therefore, very important to have staff within each school who are very knowledgeable and supportive of The Horse Connection, and can serve as *champions* when necessary.

- Subsequently, strong relationships with the participating schools can only strengthen the programming and the outcomes for the students. The Horse Connection experiences good political support from the school division Board of Trustees, and very good support from the school division administration. Individuals within the administration are highly knowledgeable about the program and experienced the track record of the program over a number of years.

This same level of understanding and support does not necessarily transmit into the individual schools. This is particularly evident within some of the newly participating schools, that those schools with new staff as contacts. It is acknowledged that relationship building takes time, but it is seen to be well worth it. Relationships contribute to stronger referrals and better overall exchange of information in support of the students.

As noted above, positive student outcomes are enhanced through a combination of program and school resources. In addition, the mission of The Horse Connection states that the program is to: *provide an educational horseback riding program, together with public schools...* Continually developing relationships enable this element of the mission to be capitalized upon.

- To further develop and strengthen relationships between the program and school it is also suggested that a means be developed for periodic information sharing between the program and relevant contacts. It is appreciated that this is time consuming, however, it serves to maintain relationships and to better inform each partner of factors in the situations of the students that can influence outcomes. These types of information sharing could simply take the form of electronic (emailed) update forms, or meetings between the respective school's student support teams and the program.
- For relationships to be more fully developed and maintained there is a need for a period of stability with respect to the program. Over the past year there has been a change in stable locations as well as an expansion into new schools. While growth is generally positive, continued expansion without attention to stabilizing understanding and relationships with existing schools can work to hamper strong referrals.

- In addition, it would appear that the Pembina Trails School Division is a good, solid and supportive partner to The Horse Connection (and has been since the beginning of the program). Therefore, consideration should be given to directly including the division / schools in any future plans for growth or change within The Horse Connection.

Conclusion

Overall, it can clearly be stated that The Horse Connection does have a direct impact on the students that it serves, and that this impact translates into more confident, self-aware and prouder students. Through the use of the horses and the dedication and passion of the staff, the program provides the *connection* for the students to opportunities that they would otherwise not experience.

The process used with the Pembina Trails School Division to refer and support students is generally seen to be effective, and with some additional adjustments, can become more efficient.

On-going relationship building is seen to be a means of strengthening both, the partnership and the outcomes for the students. Efforts to continue to grow the partnership as well as the program will well serve current and future students.

Respectfully submitted for consideration...

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