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The Voice of Canadian Credit Unions

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# a kick-start for KIDS ♥



## B.C.'s Success By 6 initiative helps children succeed for life

By Alexandra Samur  
Photography by Jen Parkin Photography

**F**or Sandra McDowell, investing in a child's early years is a no-brainer — in fact, it all comes down to just that: the human brain.

McDowell is the vice-president of Community and Culture at B.C.'s oldest credit union, **First Credit Union** (10,000 members, \$300 million in assets) in Powell River, B.C., and mother of a six-year-old. She explains that scientific studies have established that 90 per cent of brain development happens by the age of six years old, and that a failure to sufficiently stimulate the brain between the ages of zero and six can directly and significantly impact long-term health. That's why she and other credit union members like her support B.C.'s Success By 6 program.

A province-wide partnership, Success By 6 brings together credit unions, United Way organizations, the B.C. government and aboriginal leadership united in "helping all children succeed for life." As the only one of its kind in Canada, the initiative focuses on early childhood development between the ages of zero to six years, recognizing how critical this window of time is in ensuring a full and productive human life.

### The birth of Success By 6

Originally a United Way-branded initiative started in Minneapolis in 1989, B.C.'s version of Success By 6 was conceived in 2003. The initial impetus behind establishing an Early Childhood Development Provincial Partnership was two-fold. Childhood vulnerability and poverty ratings in the province were increasing. This was coupled with concerns that children and families were suffering from fragmented early years planning and funding inequity within and between communities. The initial partnership was composed of B.C.'s Ministry of Children & Family Development, United Ways, and Credit Unions of B.C. In 2009 a fourth partner representing aboriginal communities joined the governance structure.

"I think most of us who have worked in the field of community development recognize that none of our communities' complex problems are solvable by any one organization ... collaboration is important for creating solutions that are important to people," explains Michael McKnight, president and CEO of United Way of the Lower Mainland. "So when we bring the non-for-profit sector, government, and the for-profit sector — in this case, credit unions — we have a much greater ability to provide solutions that work."

Now into its second decade, the partnership builds on its original vision, strengthening the capacity of parents and communities so children can be healthy, safe, secure, socially engaged, and successful learners by the time they enter kindergarten.

Today, Success By 6 works in more than 550 communities across British Columbia. At the local level this means consulting with regional Early Years Councils to research community needs, develop strategic plans, identify priority areas for funding, and collaborate on delivering programs and activities for young children and their families.

Whether through holding local health fairs, developing aboriginal language and cultural resources, hosting cultural events, creating resource directories, or planning new playgrounds, each community collectively decides what is required, and what actions to take to make it happen.

### Trickle-down economics

The strength of the funding relationship between partners has been key to Success By 6's long-term sustainability. In the first 10 years of the program, the government of British Columbia had contributed a hefty \$34.8 million — but over this same period, that funding was leveraged to generate another \$41.8 million brought in by United Ways, the credit unions, and community partners.





**“Every dollar spent in the zero to six years is like \$7 invested in a 19-year-old”**  
—**Joseph Dunn, provincial director, Success By 6**



“All the research is very tangible in showing that if you invest in the early years, every dollar spent in the zero to six years is like \$7 invested in a 19-year-old,” says Joseph Dunn, provincial director, Success By 6. “So just in terms of the economics, it makes a lot of sense.”

Clearly, the sustainability of the program is due in no small part to B.C.’s credit unions. Ninety-two per cent of all credit union members in the province (represented by 36 credit unions) contribute 25 cents per member each year, raising \$450,000 annually to assist in all aspects of the initiative.

### The power of play

Prince George-based Success By 6 coordinator Bob Moore initially reached out to Credit Unions of B.C. for seed funding to launch production of 2,500 Play and Learn Together boxes aimed to provide education essentials for children in far-flung communities across north central B.C.

“Prince George is quite spread out, so the neighbourhoods on the periphery can’t get in to these resources,” Moore explains. “A lot of what communities are dealing with are transportation problems — they can’t afford to take their child several blocks to go to a Strong Start program because they can’t afford the bus fees.”

The boxes were his answer to those geographic challenges. With the \$16,000 grant he received from Credit Unions of B.C., Moore was able to get the boxes produced. Additionally he was able to obtain thousands of supplies — from writing pads to pencil sharpeners — that he bought at cost or that were donated from companies who wanted to support the early learning cause. “Our idea was to give families boxes with basic tools in them — things like scissors, crayons and pencils, plus a book of instructions on how to use them; how to teach children how to use a pair of scissors for example, and activities they can do with the children.”

The 2,500 boxes were produced in 2014 and so far, 1,500 have been distributed to eight centres: Prince George, Quesnel, Vanderhoof, Fort St. James, Fraser Lake, Burns Lake, Mackenzie, and Valemount. From there the boxes have been distributed to outlying communities, including 23 aboriginal reserves.

“We try to get the box to the family through an agency or group working with the family . . . if the parents don’t understand something about a particular component they can ask their home care worker or whoever they are connected with,” says Moore.

“The main concept that we are trying to teach parents is that play is teaching. Learning something for children should be fun. They shouldn’t be forced

to use scissors, or forced to use pencils but you turn it into a game. That’s the way that children learn best.”

Currently, Moore is in the process of getting the remaining boxes to children in need and he’s excited about the project’s potential. “It’s a tremendous amount of work but it’s tremendously rewarding too. I would like to see this become a B.C.-wide approach to dealing with this issue because I know it’s the same issue all over the north and all over B.C.”

And while their financial contributions are an important source of support, they aren’t the only way credit union members are involved with Success By 6.

### Overcoming isolation

Just like families in the province’s north, families living in and around Powell River on B.C.’s Sunshine Coast face geographic isolation. That’s why the ORCA Bus first got started in 2009, says McDowell.

ORCA stands for “On the Road with Children’s Activities,” and the idea was inspired by similar projects focused on bringing programming to families living in remote communities. The ORCA bus brings a variety of early childhood programs to the area. Driven by volunteers — mostly retired millworkers — it travels four to five days a week stopping at parks, schools, and events in communities in and around Powell River: south to Saltery Bay, and up to the northernmost point of Highway 101 at Lund, and also to Texada Island.

“We have traditional library-based programs in our communities, but we were looking for ways to reach outlying communities where programs could come to them rather than expecting families to always come to the programs,” says McDowell.

Success By 6 partners with the local school district to bring early childhood development focused Strong Start programs facilitated on the bus. Regional coordinator, Elise Statham, also collaborates on programming with a number of different service providers in Powell River including the City of Powell River Recreation Department, Powell River Fire Rescue, and the Infant Development Program run by inclusion Powell River.

Research shows that play is an essential part of early childhood development — specifically, psychosocial development — which depends on love, and physical and verbal stimulation. According to one UNICEF report on early childhood development, “practically speaking, this means touching, talking, caring for, and playing with children.” ORCA Bus programming is focused on just that.

“Families board the bus with their children and everything is centred on play,” says Statham. “Typically a program is two hours and families can come and go as they please within that two-hour time

frame. A program would typically involve play aboard the bus — playdough, magnets, story time, dress-up, blocks, trains — you name it.”

Also included on the bus is cultural programming for children from the nearby Sliammon First Nation. “We partner with Sliammon (Tla’Amin) Community Health Services; they have a cultural coordinator who will go to Sliammon and she will do a cultural-themed program around the Salish language so we also focus on bringing the language to those preschoolers there,” says Statham. “The cultural coordinator also partners with our Strong Start program and she’ll come aboard the bus and do drumming.”

Additionally, bridging B.C.’s urban-rural divide has also been a crucial part of the work Success By 6’s coordinators do with aboriginal communities.

### Building bridges in B.C.

Since aboriginal communities are so diverse, working with local families effectively isn’t simply about providing pre-packaged outreach programs and educational resources. For Success By 6 aboriginal coordinator, Ada Mawson, building relationships within communities to allow her to tailor programs has been an essential part of her job.

For example, one urban program, in Duncan, on Vancouver Island, focuses on keeping aboriginal children connected to their larger community. At Duncan’s Growing Together Child and Parent Society childcare program, 70 to 75 per cent of children who attend are urban First Nations and don’t always have access to elders, Mawson says. Accordingly, Success By 6 funds a Cowichan First Nations elder to visit the program on a weekly basis.

“She’s kind of like a grandma hanging out at the daycare,” says Mawson. “She’s able to go provide cultural teaching, language — just to be able to listen, to be able to share her knowledge, her skills, her wisdom — but it’s also working with the staff and talking to the parents.” Language classes are also a priority. “In Cowichan we realized that there are only so many of our elders who can still speak and write the language, and we recognize that a lot of our youth and little ones haven’t had the opportunity to learn their own language,” Mawson says.

Developed four years ago to respond to local demand, a weekly Hul’qumi’mum language class was organized with the help of three elders from one family: the Georges. Following the success of the weekly “Georgetown Language class,” two children’s CDs were produced to teach basics like the days of the week, colours, and simple children’s songs in Hul’qumi’mum.

“After the CDs were done they just went out like

hotcakes,” says Mawson. “They’ve gone to all the local schools, they’ve gone to the library, they’ve gone to various different nations in our territories, and I just can’t keep up with them!”

These programs are just a couple of examples illustrating how regional coordinators like Mawson focus on aboriginal engagement to support First Nations communities, Métis organizations, and urban aboriginal agencies across B.C., from the North Peace region to the South Okanagan.

### Extending the reach to those in need

Despite these successes, there is still much work to be done; B.C. childhood vulnerability rates have continued to climb (though in

smaller increments) for the last 12 years. “We know that we are not providing an impact or providing services to every kid in British Columbia, whether it’s harder to reach communities because of geography, because they’re newcomers to Canada, or from aboriginal communities,” says McKnight. “There are groups of young families facing challenges and we have not got to them all. So 2016 provides an opportunity for us to reach out even further than we’re currently doing.”

Dunn lists three lofty “Ls” — “bringing leadership, leveraging resources and linking services” — in outlining the initiative’s desire to expand its reach to support healthy childhood development for more B.C. children, and to ensure that the wider community recognizes the critical need to be involved in the early years.

“That means a lot of work by municipalities who have not traditionally been involved in the early years will have a role to play in the planning process,” Dunn explains. “In terms of community development, it started at the grassroots level with service providers coming together. That work is still critical, but now it’s the recognition that we need to get the superintendent of schools sitting at the table with the manager of health or the mayor and council — people who can really leverage their decision-making authority — to support the early years.”

As the old proverb goes, “it takes a village to raise a child.” And all this work goes to further one simple goal: to see more kids ready to succeed by the time they start school. ■



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