



Community Development Agents: Uniquely Positioned Individuals Affecting Change

What does a Community Development Agent (CDA) do? The answer is one that is not straight-forward as CDAs are constantly adapting to their ever-changing school environments

According to LEARN Quebec's Provincial Resource Team (PRT), the 44 CDAs who are a part of the CLC network's more than 90 schools are passionate individuals who work tirelessly to build and foster mutually-beneficial partnerships that support community vitality and student success. "CDAs are in a really unique position, being exceptionally well-positioned within their schools and communities," said PRT Project Coordinator Bobbie Variantzas. Variantzas, herself, was a CDA for 10 years before joining the PRT and knows the role very well. "Principals and teachers cannot leave the school during the day to immerse themselves in their communities and develop partnerships - the CDAs can do this.

Verdun CLC CDA, Simone Viger, has been in that position since 2017, making her adept at describing the role she plays in her three urban schools. "A CDA is an added resource for the school who makes strong ties to community organizations while working with principals, teaching staff, and support staff," she said. "Most of my work is meeting with leaders in the community and finding out about different projects or grants that will add more resources to the school and link the school's families to these community organizations."

In 2022 Dr. Patricia Lamarre wrote a paper for the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN) exploring the CLC network in Quebec. She notes that "Quebec's English schools face a diversity of local challenges, such as declining student populations, small schools in the regions, poverty, isolation, and limited resources." The vast difference in concerns faced by Quebec's English schools calls for CDAs who are committed to working alongside school teams and immersing themselves into their schools' urban or rural communities to address various needs. The CDA position has been established in schools across the province, from Stanstead to Sept-Îles.

Ed Sweeney is LEARN's most senior CDA, being in the position for 16 years. He represents the Quebec CLC, which comprises two high schools and one elementary school. Sweeney's reality is a mix of urban and rural, which means he is constantly adjusting his resources and activities. "The schools cover a very big surface area, about 5,000 square kilometers and are not classified as neighbourhood schools," Sweeney said. "This means we rarely have after-school programming so I need to be creative when bringing programs into the school and focus on in-class projects or lunch activities."

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Quebec City
CLC

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A current project Sweeney is developing with Holland Elementary is the creation of a community garden and is a prime example of how CDAs need to think outside the box in order to provide meaningful experiences to students, staff, and community members. The school has a retirement home located directly behind it so Sweeney capitalized on the proximity of the home to the school and applied for grants to offset the cost of constructing a garden between both buildings. Once the garden is in place, the students will care for it during school hours and the retirees will look after it during the summer. “It’s not only an intergenerational project but it is also a way to bring an activity to the students during the school day,” said Sweeney of the project that has already received \$30,000 in funding.

More often than not, CDAs are also part of an extended-model CLC where they will be responsible for two or more schools, which can include elementary, high school, and adult/vocational centres. Navigating between the different schools can be a challenge as the needs of elementary students are different than those of high school students and adult learners.

For Viger, balancing two elementary schools and one high school is not always easy, however, she has found ways to navigate her workdays. “I plan my weeks out so that I make a point of being present in each school, at least one day per week,” she said. “I aim to have a weekly meeting with the principals and my day-to-day consists of checking in with staff members because those are the folks I work with and rely on the most and they work with students and partners.”

In addition to the in-school responsibilities CDAs take on, they also participate in webinars/workshops, sit on neighbourhood tables, participate in their schools’ governing board meetings, and write grants. Michael Sitruk, CDA for the Richelieu Valley CLC, which is made up of four elementary schools, said he would caution any new CDA from taking on too much to avoid burning out. “If you’re just starting out, my advice would be to lower your expectations of how fast you’re going to get things done,” he said of juggling daily CDA tasks. “New CDAs shouldn’t compare themselves to others who have done this job for years. It takes time to build relationships and get the hang of the CDA role.”

Although the CDA position might vary from school to school, the one common theme that binds all of LEARN Quebec’s CDAs together is that the role is one that is extremely rewarding. “CDAs are catalysts for change in their schools and communities,” Sweeney said, reflecting on what he’s learned throughout the years. “You might be that one person a teacher needs in order to step out of their comfort zone and do some outside of the box thinking. And there’s always certain students that need a little more and you bring in resources that will get those kids through the year. That’s what inspires me.”

For Viger, seeing positive-impact projects come to fruition is what drives her. She is particularly proud of a partnership she formed with Suspicious Fish in Verdun, a not-for-profit community organization that was born from one person wanting to offer creative writing to youth and another who wanted to be involved in the schools. The partnership went from offering art labs at lunchtime in Viger’s schools to now having Suspicious Fish open their own community centre where students from her schools will have a place to explore their creativity outside of school hours.

“I really do think a CLC school can add to a child’s sense of belonging,” Viger said. “I love when someone is involved in a project and they’re like ‘wow, I never knew this would happen.’ When everyone brings their strengths to the table, unexpected benefits come from collaboration. In this role, it’s amazing to see all the positive people can create together.”