



GRIT

The Future
is Inclusive



Building on our *strong* foundation

BUILDING PATHWAYS FOR INCLUSION

2023/24 Annual Report



Message from the Board Chair



Karen Lynch, Chair

The Egyptian pyramids illustrate the everlasting benefit of a solid foundation - a firm base to withstand the weight and pressure of the varying-sized stones above. The foundation of GRIT has been built by people who care about the inclusion of children living with disabilities in the everyday spheres of childhood. Playgrounds, childcare centers, and kindergartens.

GRIT's board is the first layer of its foundation. The volunteer Board of Directors has created the 'shape' of GRIT over the past four years, with a focus on attracting pragmatic, strategic, empathetic, and knowledgeable leadership.

Building the next layer of the 'pyramid' was working with senior leadership and stakeholders to produce Strategic Directions 2025-2030. A greater focus on budget and less emphasis on inclusivity in government policy has greatly increased the number of children requiring GRIT services. At the same time, data-informed research provides novel approaches to help us and help our community partners to accomplish our goals.

We know what needs to be done. We have the knowledge and passion to ensure all children have the most promising childhood that Alberta can offer. The challenge is how fast and effectively GRIT can respond.

We know that public policy at its best – data-informed, coordinated, thoughtful and deliverable – is possible. And if any policymaker doubts that GRIT has the solid foundation necessary to ensure all children grow up with a sense of self-worth and strength – GRIT's testimonials from families and educators say it all.

An effective board requires deeply committed volunteers with a variety of areas of expertise and governance experience. The foundation that this board has created is an extraordinary display of governance. My deep gratitude for the opportunity to serve GRIT with them is only exceeded by my admiration for their contributions.

Thank you to the GRIT board, staff and families and individual donors for paving pathways for children with disabilities.

Regards,

Karen Lynch
Chair, GRIT

Message from the CEO



Amber Mack, CEO

GRIT has grown. Our pathways are reaching farther than ever before. Expanding our journey has meant we are truly living our mission and values to reach more communities across Canada.

Our steadfast commitment has broadened our partners to even more early learning environments, from the local preschool in a community hall to working with ministry leads in other provinces and territories to bring inclusive practices to their services. A clear communication strategy, investing in our people, and securing the resources to support our work is indicative of the maturation of GRIT.

We work to live our values, we work to continue to learn, and we know our vision is to change the conversation from ‘what is wrong with this child’ to ‘what supports do we need to build to ensure belonging.’ There are bright glimmers of true equity in early learning and care as we shift our thinking as a sector to recognize that ‘how the children are doing’ is a reflection and magnification of how the adults are doing. Providing a full continuum of inclusion supports lets us climb up and down our pyramid from universal practice to the most complex individual supports because we can go together.

GRIT will continue to sharpen our corners in the future by addressing ableism, equity, and connection in our work. Thank you for your support and partnership.

Regards,

Amber Mack
CEO, GRIT

“Inclusion in early childhood programs can set the foundation for inclusion across a whole lifetime.”



Vision

Communities embrace diversity and uphold the rights of all children and their families.

Mission

To build on the skills, knowledge, and confidence of families and educators to ensure that children are supported in inclusive settings and meaningfully participate in everyday routines.

Values

- **Family-Centred Practice** – Parents hold a central role in decision-making and choices for the well-being of their child and family. Parents experience active parent participation, learning, and gain confidence to positively influence their children's future.
- **Inclusion** – The belief that “we all belong.” All children have the right to participate in natural settings. When children are included, they are active and valued participants in life.
- **Learning Through Play & Everyday Routines** – Play nourishes development and forms a strong foundation for learning. Through play, children make sense of their world, expand their imagination, gain independence and develop friendships.
- **Learning Community** – The most valuable assets of an organization are engaged and passionate people. Together, they learn, seek knowledge, and discover innovative practices for their work.



The Impact of Inclusion: Program Highlights

Early Childhood Services (ECS)

ECS offers multidisciplinary supports to families of children with disabilities, using a Primary Service Provider (PSP) model. Key accomplishments over the past year include:

- Implementing best practices for the Primary Service Provider Model (supported by the Stollery Charitable Foundation)
- Transitioning to digital charting to improve access to information
- Expanding the ECS team to support more families
- Partnering with Alberta Health Services to enhance training on supporting children with tracheostomies
- Creating new learning opportunities on early childhood mental health (supported by the City of Edmonton Family and Community Support Services Grant)



“GRIT doing outreach and working with our daycare has brought us such peace of mind in terms of Rocco’s development and care. Everyone on the GRIT team has a genuine, vested interest in his growth as a person. Rocco has come such a long way in his engagement and skill development over the past two years. His determined spirit and sense of humour are celebrated and maximized in a positive environment where he can thrive.”

Peggy and Greg, ECS parents

“GRIT has impacted our family to see beyond the disability. To start a vision for our child and work towards that vision. Our GRIT developmental assistant has also shown us how hope can become a reality with some work over time. The people in the office have also shown us nothing but smiles and are thrilled when we pop in to say ‘hi.’”

Faith, ECS parent

“GRIT gave me the push when I wanted to keep Micheal to myself and in a home program to protect him from everything and everyone. Without GRIT, he wouldn’t have playdates with friends from school and go to birthday parties because I would have kept him safe at home and unprepared for his first year of school. GRIT has helped support him with tools for the classroom and for me at home.”

Laura, ECS parent

Access, Support, and Participation (ASaP)

ASaP provides coaching support and professional learning on inclusive practices for licensed early learning and care programs, supporting each program for up to two years. This year, we also increased offerings for ASaP alumni sites that have already completed their initial engagement with the program.

Key achievements in 2023-24 include:

Steady onboarding of new ASaP sites (early learning and childcare programs receiving support) and continued coaching and leadership support for active ASaP sites —

100 active sites are currently receiving coaching.

Increased monitoring and attention to leadership and sustainability with **Benchmarks of Quality (BoQ) focus.**

Creation and implementation of first steps for ASaP Alumni program —

132 alumni centres are currently receiving support.

Started group coaching sessions focused on program-wide implementation strategies for Alumni leadership teams.

ACHIEVING ‘DEMO STATUS’

ASaP sites that achieve ‘demo status’ are recognized as examples of excellence in inclusive practices. For many of these educators, this is a culmination of years of hard work with their ASaP coach.

Congratulations to this year’s ‘demo status’ rooms!

- Seeds of Spice — Varsity Acres
- Seeds of Spice — Freda Miller
- Seeds of Spice — Altadore
- Dragons & Butterflies — 16th Ave
- Dragons & Butterflies — Sprague way
- Summit Start — Riverview
- Oyen Daycare
- Alphabet Daycare
- Taber Child Care Centre

“Our journey with the ASaP program has been a journey of continued growth and learning, both for us as leaders and for our staff as educators. Creating a community of practice that supports children’s social and emotional development starts with us. Our coach has been instrumental in providing our team with not just the material resources to reach this goal but also in developing the educators’ skills and confidence to be effective in their role when supporting children through some big emotions.

The endless resources and professional development support have been invaluable. When we reflect on our practice and see how far we have come, it encourages us to continue the journey. We value the ASaP program and would encourage any program to participate. They will not be disappointed.”

Monique Davis, Director, and **Alma Currie**, Executive Director, Summit Start, Calgary, AB

Inclusive Child Care (ICC)

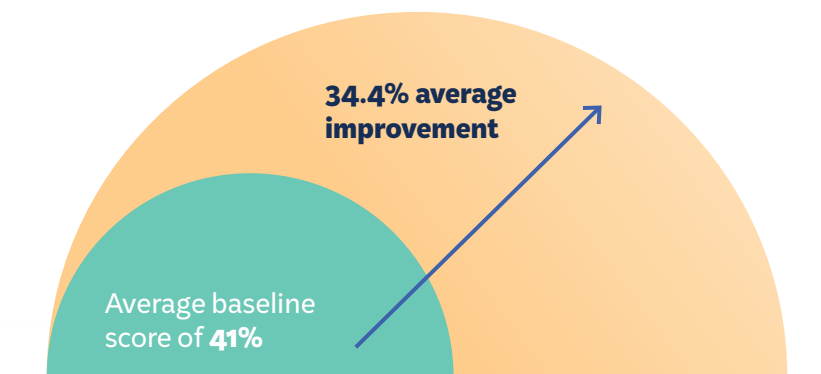
ICC provides brief, intensive coaching support and professional learning opportunities for licensed childcare programs. Programs apply for support in one room at a time, with some centres applying for multiple rooms - in 2023-24, ICC supported

293 rooms within 202 childcare programs.

OUTCOME MEASUREMENT

At the beginning of their journey with ICC, an assessment is conducted to evaluate each room's current implementation of inclusive practices. The same assessment is repeated at the end of the room's 6-month engagement with ICC.

This year, the average baseline score (pre-coaching) was 41%, while the average score after 6 months with ICC was 76% – **an average improvement of 34.4%.**



“For the past six months, we have been working with Kim, an Inclusive Childcare coach (ICC) from the GRIT program. Kim’s primary goal is to assist educators in creating a responsive and nurturing environment that supports positive behaviour and growth in children. This involves techniques for managing and guiding behaviour, promoting healthy development, and fostering effective communication, all aimed at improving the overall well-being of the children and a sense of belonging in our community. Thanks to Kim, we are able to support the diverse needs in the room using inclusive practices that are catered to each child.”

Marigold Room, Jasper Place Family Resource Centre

COLLABORATIVE CONNECTIONS

Collaboration and communication among various stakeholders to support childcare programs and children with diverse needs is also a critical outcome of the Inclusive Child Care program.

Key activities that GRIT ICC engaged in related to achieving this outcome:

1. Engaging Licensing Officers
2. Building Relationships
3. Collaborative Practices
4. Consistency in Practices
5. Interagency Collaboration



New Service: Inclusion Navigators

SARAH AND LEO'S STORY

When Sarah received the call from her son Leo's childcare centre, her heart sank. Leo, only two years old, was being asked to leave because of his "challenging behaviour."

She felt a rush of emotions – frustration, sadness, and above all, helplessness. What would her family do now? How could they find a place where Leo was welcome?

The childcare centre staff shared Sarah's worries. They cared about Leo and wished they could keep him in the program, but they didn't have the tools or training to meet his needs. Without resources, they felt forced to make a heartbreaking decision.

Sarah, Leo, and the educators at their childcare centre aren't alone. Unfortunately, the challenges they're facing are very common.

That's where GRIT's new Inclusion Navigators come in.

Preschool expulsion is a symptom of larger systemic barriers in early learning and care. Our Inclusion Navigators work tirelessly to connect families and childcare programs with the right supports at the right time.

This can include:

- Helping families find a childcare program that has the skills and confidence to implement inclusive practices
- Helping families arrange referrals to appropriate health professionals if needed
- Helping families navigate access to funding and services for children with disabilities and additional support needs
- Connecting childcare centres and family dayhomes with inclusion-related supports from GRIT and other agencies across the province

In their first 6 months, our Inclusion Navigators have already helped with hundreds of situations like Sarah and Leo's.

We know that through connection and collaboration, we can build a stronger early learning and care system that works for children, families, and educators.



Connecting Canada (CC)

Connecting Canada partners with early learning sector leaders across the country, helping them fill in the gaps when it comes to providing inclusive childcare for children with disabilities. It helps early childhood educators connect through shared knowledge and practices to promote inclusion and children's social-emotional well-being.

5 new partners joined Connecting Canada last year, for a total of **13 partner organizations**:

- Early Childhood Development Association of Prince Edward Island
- North Hastings Children's Services, Bancroft, Ontario
- Child Development Centre (Early Learning Program Support) Whitehorse, Yukon
- Family and Child Care Connections, Newfoundland & Labrador
- Nova Scotia Early Childhood Development Intervention Services
- Saskatchewan Early Childhood Association
- Northwest Territories Early Childhood Association
- YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg
- New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Anglophone
- New Brunswick Ministère de l'Éducation et Développement de la petite enfance Francophone

- Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education
- The Centre for Child Development, Surrey, British Columbia
- Amiskwaciy Cultural Society (Head Start Program), Edmonton, Alberta

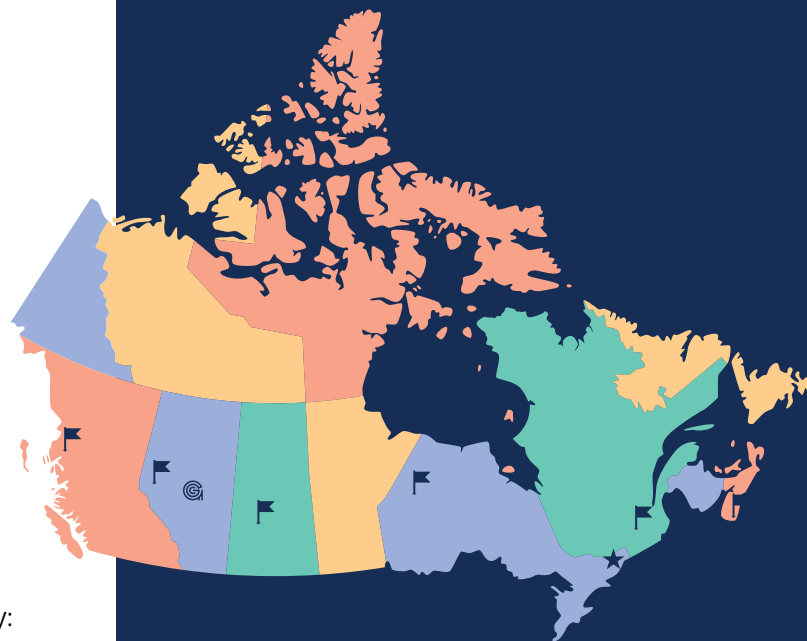
Connecting Canada also created **two new communities of practice** with our partners to support sustainability:

Leadership Community of Practice

- Purpose: To offer a learning platform where Connecting Canada partners can reflect on their implementation of the Pyramid Model framework while learning from other provinces and territories. To support the development of a Community-Wide Implementation (CWI) Team.

Francophone Coach Community of Practice

- Purpose: To create a collaborative and reflective space where participating Francophone participants can connect, explore, and develop their coaching skills, while building meaningful relationships.



"We have had a fantastic experience working with Connecting Canada! Our Implementation Lead (Kristina) is so supportive and enthusiastic and has offered guidance not only with the Pyramid Model but with other areas related to Inclusion and Diversity. Connecting Canada's flexible, relationship-centred, and inclusive approach to supporting their partners is apparent and thoroughly appreciated. In particular, we were drawn to their understanding that each province/territory has its own unique differences and that how the Pyramid Model will look in each jurisdiction will (and should be) different!"

Stacey Arbuckle, Program Consultant, Early Learning and Development (Branch), New Brunswick Dept. of Education and Early Childhood Development

Professional Learning at GRIT in 2023-24

Quick Facts

From September 1, 2023, to August 31, 2024, GRIT provided

a total of
133 workshops
to approximately
6,016 participants.

GRIT presentations at conferences went up over 130%*

compared to the previous year.

We shared our expertise through 12 sessions and 2 vendor tables at 10 provincial, national, and international conferences.

“On-demand” workshop delivery to organizations went up 60%*
compared to the year before, from 10 workshops to 16.

*Percentages based on the number of workshops delivered, not participant numbers

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

GRIT’s professional learning is well-received by participants. Feedback indicates there are many takeaways for educators that they can apply to their daily practice, that facilitators are engaging, and that content helps them reflect on enriching their practices while affirming the great work they are already doing.

“Can’t wait to take the next one!”

“Feeling inspired after last night’s talk on enhancing activity transitions with new techniques and ideas.”

“The format of these lessons is fantastic. 45-minute time slots are long enough to get into a topic without losing engagement, and a week break between gives me a chance to digest and work with this information before working through a new topic next week.

Thank you!”



Focus and Finish

Wrapping up the Strategic Plan 2020-2024

We have had Three Strategic Directions driving our work over the past four years. The strategy in this past year, the final year of the current plan, has been to focus and finish.

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS INCLUDE:

DIRECTION 1 — Engage families as active participants and decision-makers in their child's well-being and learning

Delivered:

- Full implementation of the Primary Service Provider Model in ECS. The increased team capacity allowed us to enroll 12 more families in 2024-2025.
- Internal communications and tools to support orientation and change were developed.
- Shift to online documentation with access for parents, providers and educators. Binders are shrinking!
- Focused project work to invest in our most valuable resource: our people. This project is delivering in three notable areas that were identified by the ECS team — Collaborative Teaming, Goal Writing, and Practice-Based Coaching.
- Our staffing model for FSCD has been revised to make room for more flexible options for families with the addition of more private allied health contractors.

DIRECTION 2 — Work with community partners to build a more inclusive Canada.

Delivered:

- ASaP understands that quality indicators must also address INCLUSION. Coaches are continuing to focus on parallel supports for Early Learning and Child Care Leadership teams AND program-wide implementation.
- Collaboration and partnership with other agencies and organizations has led to an expedited review process for children requiring ratio supports in their Early Learning and Child Care settings.
- GRIT was a source of expertise in the development and implementation of the Inclusive Child Care Program in collaboration with four other partner agencies across Alberta.
- GRIT continues to build on the strength of our government relations by finding solutions that work for children, families and educators across ministries.
- Connecting Canada is in its final project year and has successfully recruited 13 partners across the provinces and territories. This work is built on the framework implementation of ASaP provincially. This focus on Leadership and Sustainability has built networks of Inclusion in the Early Years across our nation.





DIRECTION 3 — Enhance the public awareness and sustainability of our organization.

Delivered:

- We know who we are, and now it's time to share our work and continue our value of learning.
- GRIT partnered with the Alberta Independent School Council Association to deliver ASaP supports in seven private ECS/ kindergartens.
- We shared our knowledge in our open learning series to sustain our work.
- We have a formal and actionable communication plan and invested in sharing our messages with a wider audience.
- GRIT invested in equitable supports for our diverse staff by sponsoring the creation of a staff-led Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Anti-Racism Working group. Staff compensation was surveyed, and resulted in enhancements to our total compensation with attention to our retirement contributions and benefit options. GRIT demonstrates our commitment to a well-compensated workforce in the early years.
- GRIT's dedicated Board of Directors worked tirelessly supported the lengthy process of updating our objectives and bylaws, creating a Risk Matrix and recruiting a new CEO — very heavy lifting for a board.
- GRIT's board also set the directions to develop a communication strategy, enable our digital transformation, invest in our cybersecurity protections and electronic banking solutions, and a mammoth move to more secure cloud-based server solutions.



Communications Audit and Communications Plan

Enhancing GRIT's communications was a key priority in 2023-24. We laid strong foundations for a more robust, strategic, and consistent approach to communications that will continue to support GRIT's success.

A Communications Audit was completed in November 2023, identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement in GRIT's communication with stakeholders. Based on these findings, a detailed Communications Plan was finalized in May, and an experienced communications manager was hired to lead the implementation of the plan.

The Communications Plan is a living document that will be updated regularly to reflect emerging opportunities and challenges. Key communications objectives and outcomes identified in 2023-24 include increasing public awareness of GRIT as a leader in inclusive early learning, attracting more donors and funders, and increasing enrolment in ASaP, ICC, and Connecting Canada.

GRIT Brand Refresh

As part of our focus on polishing our communications in 2023-24, GRIT completed a brand refresh process to bring our visual identity in line with our organization's current state and future aspirations.

Our new branding makes it clearer that all of the GRIT programs are part of the same family, with a distinct but cohesive sub-brand for each program. The updated GRIT logo and new program logos are supported by a new visual identity system that is vibrant, engaging, and approachable, with a colourful block pattern inspired by children's building blocks to symbolize play and learning. The block pattern also loosely references the internationally recognized visual language of Nautical Flags, to represent diverse forms of communication that help break down barriers and advance inclusion for all.

GRIT's mission, vision, and values remain the same, but we're excited to have an updated visual identity system that better reflects our scope, culture, and organizational maturity.

Information Technology Audit, Cybersecurity and New IT Supports

As an organization that relies heavily on technology and handles large volumes of confidential information, it is essential for GRIT to maintain the effectiveness and integrity of our IT systems. We completed an Information Technology Audit in 2023-24 to explore how we could improve.

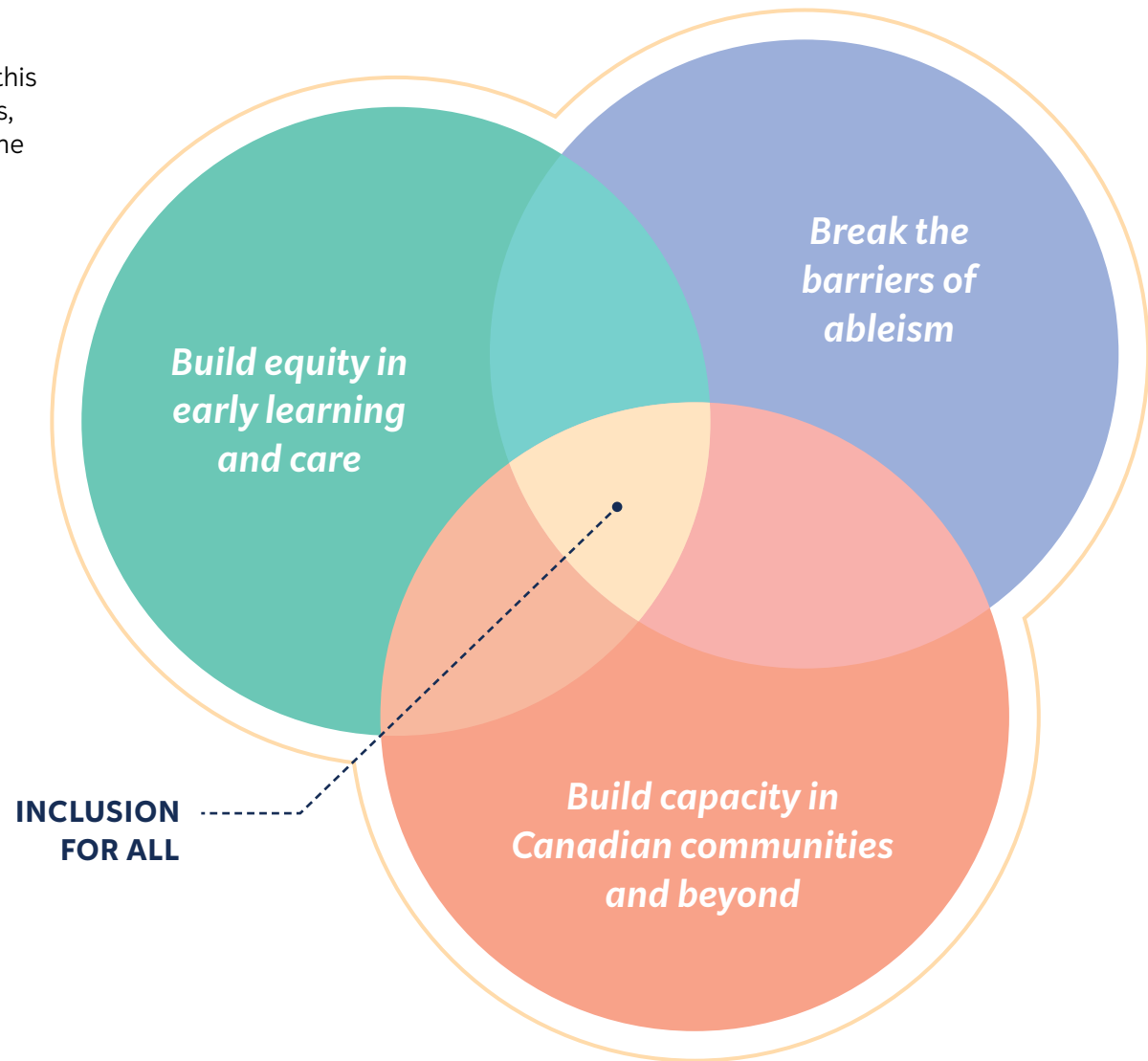
Following the IT Audit, we issued an RFP for a new IT support provider. We selected Technology Helps and began our transition to working with them, introducing our staff to the new provider and processes. In light of the growing prevalence and sophistication of cyberattacks, one of the first major projects for GRIT and Technology Helps this year was the rollout of enhanced cybersecurity training for all GRIT staff.

For the Families

GRIT's Future Proofing Plan for 2025 to 2030

With our previous Strategic Plan wrapping up this year, GRIT engaged with our Board of Directors, leadership team, staff, and clients to draw up the plan for the next five years.

The resulting plan is both ambitious and mindful. We are pleased to present our new Strategic Directions for 2025-2030:



Thank you to our donors.

Your support is building a more inclusive future.

\$250-\$999

Marilyn Armstrong
Jason Arsenault
Susan Bayne
Jackie Cromie
Marta Jomha
Karen Lynch
PiP Street Hospitality
Emma Pivato
Barb Reid

\$1000-\$4,999

Trevor Armstrong
Gina Blank
Chiungyun Chang
Professional Corporation
David Frazier
RBC Foundation
Dr. Shawn Reynolds
Terry Zajac

\$5,000-\$9,999

APEGA
Edmonton Community
Foundation
The Muttart Foundation

\$10,000+

Ron Cameron Foundation



Financials

Statement of Financial Position

ASSETS	2023/2024	2022/2023
Cash & temporary investments	\$ 5,436,728	\$ 5,403,123
Accounts receivable	135,099	114,834
Prepaid expenses	32,854	12,654
Total Current asset	5,604,680	5,530,611
Long term investments	–	–
Capital Assets	238,106	280,293
TOTAL ASSETS	5,842,786	5,810,905

LIABILITIES	2023/2024	2022/2023
Total Liabilities	3,517,958	3,542,859

NET ASSETS	2023/2024	2022/2023
Unrestricted	1,561,489	1,469,980
Investment in Capital Assets	235,880	270,607
Restricted	527,460	527,460
Total Net Assets	2,324,828	2,268,046
TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	\$ 5,842,786	\$ 5,810,905

Statement of Activities

REVENUE	2023/2024	2022/2023
Alberta ED	\$ 3,455,037	\$ 3,263,154
Other Alberta Government	4,754,737	3,963,742
Government of Canada	572,852	558,938
Alberta Municipalities	5,742	–
Donations	101,638	93,462
Fundraising	2,000	29,933
Investment/other income	301,036	272,323
TOTAL REVENUE	9,193,043	8,181,552

EXPENSES	2023/2024	2022/2023
Program Services	8,039,309	7,013,562
Admin/Operations	1,096,950	965,544
Fundraising	–	6,877
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$ 9,136,259	\$ 7,985,983

Change in unrestricted net assets	56,783	195,539
Change in restricted net assets	–	–
Net assets - beginning of year	2,268,046	2,072,507
Net assets - end of year	2,324,828	2,268,046

Board of Directors

Thank you to our volunteer Board of Directors for guiding us through another year of exciting growth and change.



Karen Lynch, Chair



Barrett Westerlund,
Vice Chair



Debbie Couch, Treasurer



Sandy Thompson-Hodgetts,
Secretary



Jane Reid, Director



Barbara O'Neill, Director



Shelby Engelking, Director



Andy Akle, Director



Freddie Martinez,
Director



Become a Supporter

GRIT relies on contributions from the community for many aspects of our work, including providing supportive equipment for children with disabilities. Supporting GRIT is a wonderful way to support the full inclusion and well-being of all children in the early years.

To Make a One-Time or Monthly Donation

Visit gritprogram.ca/donate

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