



Wabano
CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL HEALTH

Pe Nah To Tah

Ottawa Urban Aboriginal Education Project



Report Background

In 2007, the Government of Ontario released its *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. The Framework identified Aboriginal education as one of the Ministry of Education's key priorities and two primary challenges were to be met by 2016. These were to:

1. Improve educational achievement among First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, and
2. Close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in literacy, numeracy, retention of students in school, graduation rates, and advancement to post-secondary studies.

Through policy and public presentations, Ottawa's school boards have indicated their commitment to creating an Aboriginal education program to ensure the success of Aboriginal students. The *First Peoples Group* (FPG) was selected in 2013 to research several school boards' Aboriginal-specific best models and practices in British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. FPG also sought and received community feedback from members and leaders of Ottawa's urban Aboriginal educational community. This expert feedback lays a sound foundation for Aboriginal education programs that are both community-driven and have proven successful across Canada.

This Report was commissioned by the *Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health*, an Aboriginal agency dedicated to health improvement among the urban First Nation, Inuit and Métis (FNIM) populations in the National Capital Region. Wabano has a stellar reputation for community development initiatives and social support services and, as such, developed a strong working relationship with both the Ottawa-Carleton District Board and the Ottawa Catholic School Board. In the words of Executive Director Allison Fisher:

'Our children must not feel that they have been erased from our historical memory; they are more than just footnotes in newspapers, or schools textbooks, or recognized one day or one week of the year as a measure of value.

They must not be continually stonewalled by attitudes and beliefs that suggest we are asking for special undeserved treatment. It sets them up against even more obstacles as the integrity of their aspirations and actions is constantly put into question.

It is a relationship between what you know, what you understand and what you do. We must have a culture that enables our children to take the right course at the right time.'

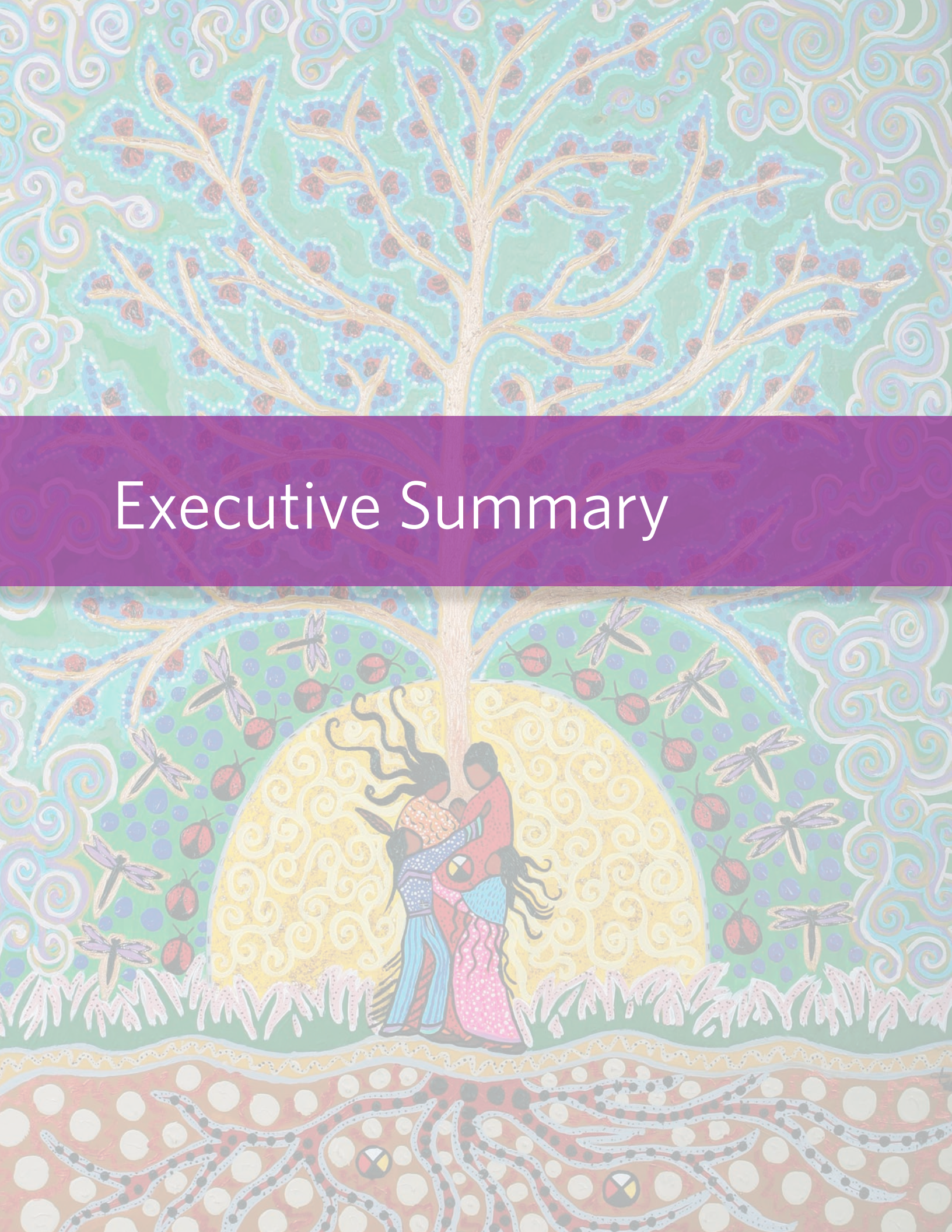
Educational initiatives that are driven by Aboriginal leaders and parents are known to have lasting positive effects on the futures of Aboriginal students and, more broadly, their wider societies.

For more information on Wabano, visit: **wabano.com**

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The illustration is a colorful, stylized artwork. At the top, a large tree with a light brown trunk and branches is set against a background of swirling green and blue patterns. The branches are adorned with small red berries. Below the tree, a large, bright yellow sun or moon with a swirling pattern is the central focus. In front of it, two figures are depicted: one in a red shirt and blue pants, and another in a pink shirt and blue pants. They appear to be embracing or dancing. The background is filled with numerous small red berries and several purple dragonflies. The bottom of the image features a brown ground area with white polka dots and a pattern of white and black lines. The overall style is reminiscent of traditional Indigenous art, with bold colors and intricate patterns.

Executive Summary



Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to support school boards in meeting the Ministry of Education challenges and recommendations, provide community-perspectives, and guide successful next steps.



The name of this report, *Pe Nah To Tah*, means “come and listen” in Cree, one of Ontario’s many first languages. It is a gentle but persistent invitation to school boards to open up their hearts and minds to sit down with with First Nations, Inuit and Métis families to learn how best to teach their students.

It also connotes the importance of sharing just how and what the school boards are doing and still need to do to meet the two primary challenges stated earlier by 2016.

Achieving the best in Aboriginal child development must start with culture as the foundation. Although the benefits of culturally-competent curricula have been proven to attract and retain FNIM high-school students, many schools lack definite focus and expertise in Aboriginal content and learning styles – a status quo that must and can be addressed. Cultural reclamation for Aboriginal families can begin in schools.

There are five key areas that are known to support FNIM parents reclaim and regenerate their cultures and traditions, and in so doing, improve the educational success of their children.

These areas are:

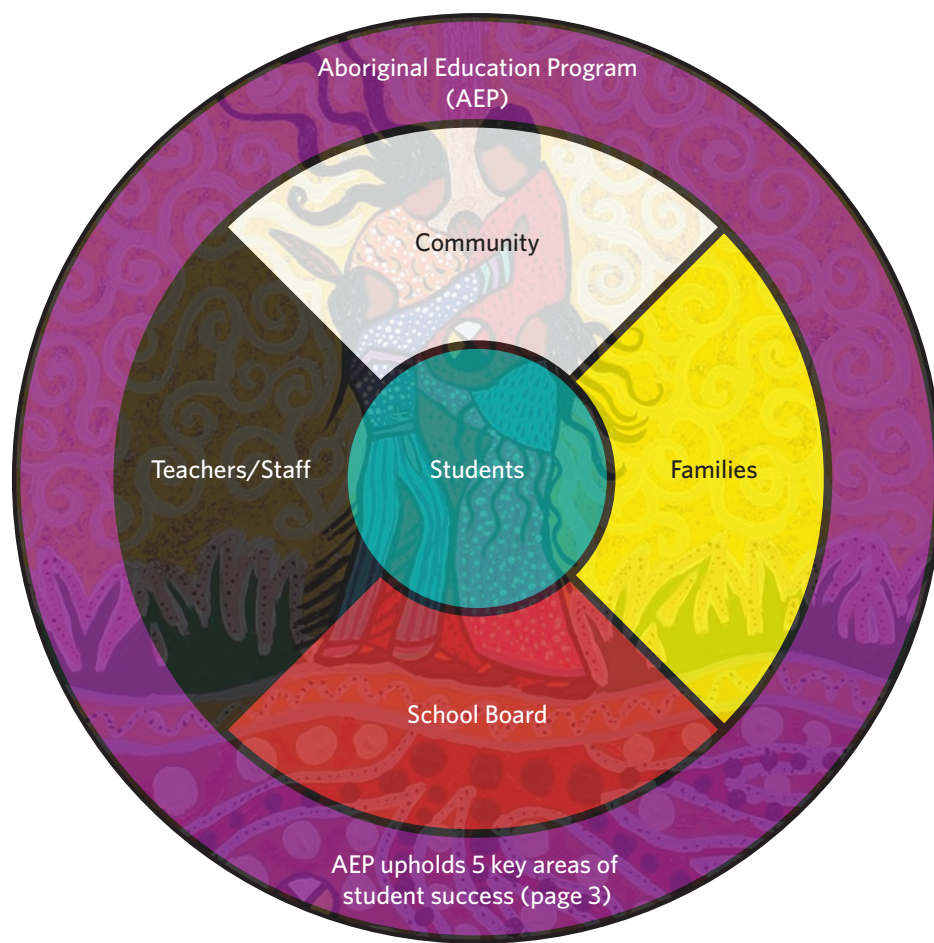
1. establishing and increasing school board commitment;
2. creating outreach, self-identification and linkages among Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) students and families;
3. meeting urgent needs of Aboriginal students;
4. improving self-confidence and academic achievement of Aboriginal students, and
5. increasing cultural understanding of all staff and students.

This report outlines the literature review and case studies undertaken on successful urban Aboriginal education models and practices using these five key themes.

A major recommendation of this Report is to create an effective process and model that ensures and maintains Aboriginal student success in the Nation’s Capital Region. The model would:

- be rooted in the same principles that other well-functioning educational initiatives are built on across in the country, and complement them;
- reflect the diversity of urban Aboriginal communities;
- integrate into existing initiatives within Ottawa’s school boards;
- be exemplary to other school boards with the same goal of developing infrastructures that improve Aboriginal student achievement.

Based on the best practices of the five case studies, the Wabano Centre offers the following model for school boards to consider when developing an Aboriginal program or school.



This is a circle model. As such, it carries the Aboriginal teachings of inclusivity and equality; ensuring that Aboriginal culture and teachings are the foundation of the model. Students are at the centre, with the key educational partners surrounding. The partners opposite each other (teachers/staff are opposite families, and community is opposite school boards) are supportive partners to one another and carry unique responsibilities to the other. As our Elders remind us, the lines in the model never divide, rather they connect all parties in a mutually-beneficial relationship. Finally, the outer circle encompassing all the partners and students is the Aboriginal Education Program. This program has the sole mandate to create transformation in the Five Area of Aboriginal Student Success (page 2):

This program would be funded by the school districts (through Ministry-designated funding for Aboriginal students), resourced with Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal contractual workers (community experts for cultural learning), and overseen by an Aboriginal Education Committee. This Committee would have representation from all partners in the model.

Moving Forward

The best practices presented in this Report echo this model and can act as guides for school boards to consider as they move forward. These points and practices are clear practical reminders to school boards about the ways that other boards have responded to the educational crises regarding improved FNIM student retention and graduation rates. They will also help school boards achieve their primary policy targets by 2016.



Although beginning the process to educational transformation for Aboriginal students may seem daunting, our Elders remind us that every journey begins with good intent and one step forward.

The checklist (below) was developed to help school boards in their efforts to establish their model for Aboriginal-friendly learning environments. It is offered as a first step in creating a new academic foundation for urban Aboriginal learners, their families, their educators and our communities.

CHECKLIST for School Board Success in Urban Aboriginal Education

This checklist can help Boards prioritize the key areas that affect Aboriginal students in their daily school lives. It can help with avoiding mistakes and addressing redundancies when beginning the process for an Aboriginal Education Program.

	Human resources	Yes	No	
1.	Are Aboriginal employees visible in various positions in the school/school board?			
2.	Are human resources personnel fully knowledgeable about the personal competencies most effective for improving communication with Aboriginal students?			
3.	Are school/school board staff hired for their expertise and also have the personal competencies most effective for improving Aboriginal student success?			
4.	Are human resources personnel knowledgeable about exemptions and adaptations that can be made to labour laws to increase the FNIM workforce in schools?			
5.	Are school staff Aboriginal-friendly and knowledgeable about how to make and maintain personal contact with Aboriginal parents and local/community leaders?			
6.	Are Aboriginal Education Specialists of First Nations, Métis or Inuit descent?			

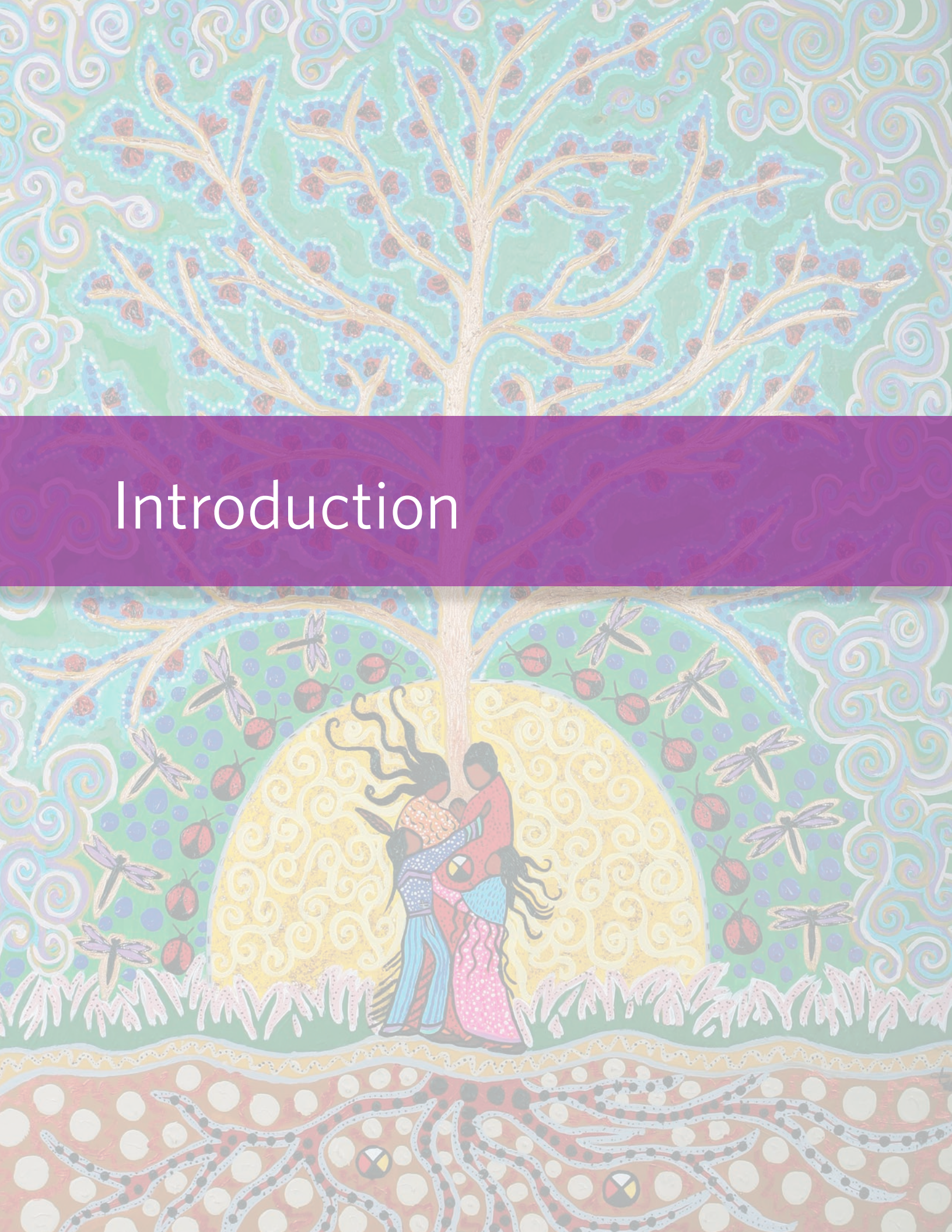


Self-identification statement or policy		Yes	No	
1.	Is the policy clear and concise about how self-identifying will help a student – rather than emphasizing the increase to the school district budgets?			
2.	Have policies been developed with Aboriginal people to ensure they are Aboriginal-friendly?			
3.	Is it worded in such a way that parents/students would likely self-identify?			
4.	Are Aboriginal perceptions, values and discernments taken consideration?			
5.	Does the school/school board authority hold proactive information sessions for FNIM parents on self-identification? e.g., a FNIM parent or moderator explains the meaning, how it can help FNIM, seeks their input on how money derived from self-identifying should be spent			
6.	Is it inclusive of all FNIM groups?			
7.	Is the privacy and confidentiality of FNIM parents/community clearly stated and upheld?			
Community engagement/consultation/parental involvement		Yes	No	
1.	Does the school/school board hold regular consultations with the FNIM on what parents want as educational goals for their children?			
2.	Is the school/school board open to responding to the ideas, suggestions, observations and comments from FNIM parents and community leaders?			
3.	Is the school/school board's communication with the FNIM community open, transparent, inclusive and welcoming?			
4.	Does the school/school board welcome feedback from the FNIM community, even if the feedback is something with which it is unfamiliar?			
5.	Is the local FNIM leadership invited to schools' events that are a "good fit" in promoting Aboriginal students' education?			
6.	Does the school authority work at creating constructive ways of involving the FNIM to advocate for parents and students?			
7.	Does the school know who makes up the local Aboriginal leadership and local systems of governance?			
Physical environment		Yes	No	
1.	Is respectful Aboriginal representation clearly visible in the school?			
2.	Is a room or area specifically available in the school for Aboriginal students' comfort and study? (e.g., a lodge or similar area dedicated to Aboriginal students)			
3.	Does staff work at establishing learning climates that are culturally friendly to Aboriginal students?			
4.	Are all staff encouraged to learn about Aboriginal culture and traditions, and feature appropriate cultural displays in classrooms and hallways, and know how to invite Elders to share their knowledge to students?			
5.	Is school space available for FNIM special cultural events and festivals, including the celebration of National Aboriginal Day?			



	Curriculum content	Yes	No	
1.	Is Aboriginal content and perspective (both history and culture) represented within the curricula?			
2.	Is Aboriginal content adequate, appropriate and respectful?			
3.	Are Aboriginal values and traditions taught?			
4.	Is Aboriginal content presented by knowledgeable teachers in ways that encourage all students to want to learn more?			
5.	Are the traditional ways-of-teaching used for Aboriginal students?			
	Accountability	Yes	No	
1.	Is the FNIM community meaningfully consulted about the plans and strategies that involve all Aboriginal education dollars?			
2.	Is the school board transparent and accountable to Aboriginal parents and the Ontario government for how it spends the money it receives for Aboriginal students?			
3.	Does the school/school board, with Aboriginal participation, implement a "Vision Framework" for improving Aboriginal student success complete with activities and timelines?			





Introduction



Introduction

Many school boards across Canada struggle with the question of what comprises Aboriginal education – is it educating Aboriginal students, or educating non-Aboriginal people and institutions about Aboriginal people, or both? School boards often appear uncertain about how to address these and similar questions, and how to encourage links between the educational needs of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, parents and students. School boards in and around the Ottawa area are no different in this regard.

In 2007, the Government of Ontario released its *Ontario First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*. This document from the Ministry of Education formally recognizes the importance of a strong effective education and the need to improve lifelong opportunities for Aboriginal children and youth. The Framework identified Aboriginal education as one of the Ministry's key priorities and two primary challenges were to be met by 2016. These were to:

1. Improve educational achievement among First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students, and
2. Close the gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in literacy, numeracy, retention of students in school, graduation rates, and advancement to post-secondary studies.

The Ministry perceives the development and implementation of effective strategies as the primary way of meeting the particular educational needs of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit students. This Report proposes a way to build on the good work that has already been accomplished. It recommends positive and stable relationships between Aboriginal communities and school boards and a recommended model for Aboriginal-specific education based on best or promising practices that emerge from community feedback. Many school boards and champions of Aboriginal education across Canada are very competent in propelling education for First Nations, Métis and Inuit populations, and the authors of this Report use Case Studies to exemplify these efforts.



The Report's authors utilize one aspect of the Mohawk culture: the three "nows" that are considered when a community works on an issue. One "now" is in the context of looking back and seeing how things used to be and how well they worked. Another "now" is the view of how things are today. Finally, the last "now" contextualizes the best way forward: the future.



Three main points are abundantly clear.

The first is that Ottawa and its surrounding areas were home to a large, historic, vibrant and diverse community of First Nations and Métis peoples. This is the “now” of how things used to be.

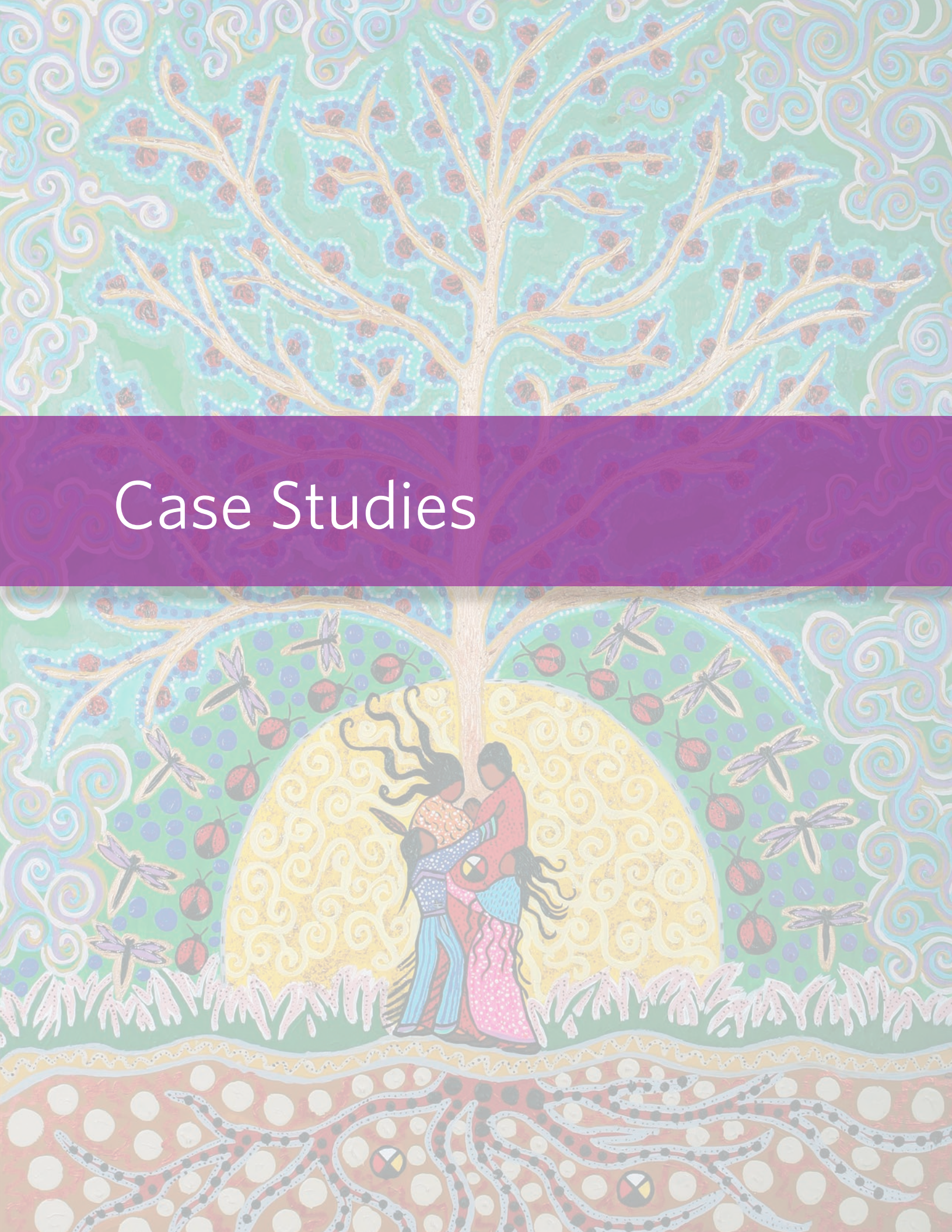
Two, the urban Aboriginal population includes a newer and growing Aboriginal population that is becoming more sophisticated, well educated and well connected. This is the “now” of contemporary times when there are more and more human resources available in the Aboriginal communities to improve the education of all First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

For the “now” of the future, it is up to the region’s school board administrators to be so insightful and inclusive that they listen to and act on the Aboriginal voices within the communities they serve.

- They must be sufficiently transparent that they share with Aboriginal parents and are accountable not only about the funding they receive for Aboriginal education, but also how they spend it.
- It is imperative for them to be flexible and share their power and authority with the First Nations, Métis and Inuit educational community of leaders, parents and students.
- Only with meaningful participation from Aboriginal people can student success rates improve and new initiatives show positive measurable outcomes.

This is the only “now” to the way forward.





Case Studies

Case Studies

There are five case studies included in this Report include:

1. Central Okanagan, BC – School District No. 23, Aboriginal Education Program
2. Kamloops/Thompson, BC – School District No. 73
3. Greater Saskatoon, SK – Catholic School Division;
4. Winnipeg, MB – Winnipeg School Division, Children of the Earth High School
5. Winnipeg, MB – Winnipeg School Division, Niji Mahka Elementary School

Although each program had unique approaches to Aboriginal education, there were similarities in how each implemented the Five Actions for Aboriginal Student Success. We have included these as overall best practices for other school boards to consider when developing their Aboriginal programs or schools on page 37.

School boards are encouraged, however, to challenge themselves. Just as we challenge our young learners to strive for excellence, so must School Boards and educators. Although successes have been attained in some regions in Canada, true equity in academic excellence for Aboriginal students has not been achieved. This level of equity can only be actualized when school boards embrace the unique needs of Aboriginal communities they serve and actively seek and implement unique approaches to meet those needs. The authors encourage school boards to read the case studies in their entirety to begin the process of *Pe Nah To Tah*.



SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 23 (CENTRAL OKANAGAN)

Location, contact: Aboriginal Education Program, 1040 Hollywood Road, Education Centre
Kelowna, BC V1X 4N2 (250) 870 – 5147
www.sd23.bc.ca/ProgramsServices/AboriginalEducation/Pages/default.aspx

Enrolment: 2,133 Aboriginal students out of 21,000 in total;
Budget: \$2.5 million/school year; 45 Aboriginal program positions

Overview

School District No. 23 (Central Okanagan) operates within the traditional territory of the Okanagan – the Syilx peoples. In partnership with the Aboriginal communities of the Central Okanagan, the District is committed to upholding the following **5 guiding principles in support of Aboriginal student success**:

1. Honour and acknowledge the people, traditional territory, and history of the Okanagan people
2. Acknowledge the traditional teachings of the Elders and the wisdom of Aboriginal cultures
3. Promote a learning environment where Aboriginal students feel confident, proud of their ancestry, and a sense of belonging in school
4. Provide educational opportunities that enhance academic success, and
5. Develop shared responsibility and mutual respect through ongoing dialogue and strong relationships that recognize the cultural differences and diverse needs of Aboriginal students.

The District's Aboriginal Education Program (AEP) continues to be supported by the Ministry of Education through targeted funding. Funding is directly related to the number of students who have identified as having First Nations (Status or non-Status, on or off reserve), Métis Nation or Inuit ancestry. In the 2011-2012 school year:

- 2,182 students claimed Aboriginal ancestry; of these, 2,133 received services from the AEP. This is approximately 10% of the total SD23 student population.
- The graduation rate increased to 69% (up 9% from previous year). This figure is higher than the provincial average of 54%.
- 98% of Grade 7-9 Aboriginal students are demonstrating passing grades with 23.5% of students achieving A grades.
- District data also indicates that for those students who start with the Program through to Grade 12, there is a success rate of 90%.

History and Background

Building the Aboriginal Program

In 1990, Aboriginal students in BC had poor graduation rates of approximately 30%, both province- and district-wide. The province was providing \$1,000 for each Aboriginal student directly to the School Board (SB); this funding was in addition to core provincial funding¹. The question being asked was, "If there's all this money coming in, why are the results still so bad?"

¹ Ottawa and other Ontario cities receive the same funding for Aboriginal students.



In response to this question, the School District (SD) began by hiring 2 (non-Aboriginal) teachers to oversee the Aboriginal students' progress, or lack of it. The teachers were to identify specific student issues (academic, social, behavioural) and provide support. They were to work with each student, but at the time, there was a student roster of 900 students for the 2 of them. The job was huge and the requirements unrealistic.

Barriers in Liaising with Aboriginal Community

The teachers made a recommendation to conduct a forum for Aboriginal families/communities regarding what parents needed for their children's education and. A total of 4 forums were held.

Parental feedback was clear:

- there was a lack of Aboriginal people working in the school systems for their children to relate to on any level. Students were foreigners at school.
- to "move forward" educationally, children/youth need Aboriginal people in the school system and more Aboriginal perspectives in educational offerings because the students were receiving only EuroCanadian views in their education.
- There was no cultural teaching, nor acknowledgement about their history, traditions and values in the curriculum or anywhere else, and yet they are the Original People. Their holistic perspectives and Indigenous epistemologies remained unvoiced and silent within the school and classroom walls.

How Were These Barriers Addressed?

From these forum recommendations, SD23 created the Aboriginal Education Program (AEP). This comprehensive program included:

- 4 Aboriginal Advocates (for more detail on the Advocates, see the notes at the end of this Case Study),
- a Cultural Facilitator and
- the Aboriginal Education Council (AEC).
- With these initiatives, graduation rates began to increase, however, formalized tools to track the success rate were not yet developed.

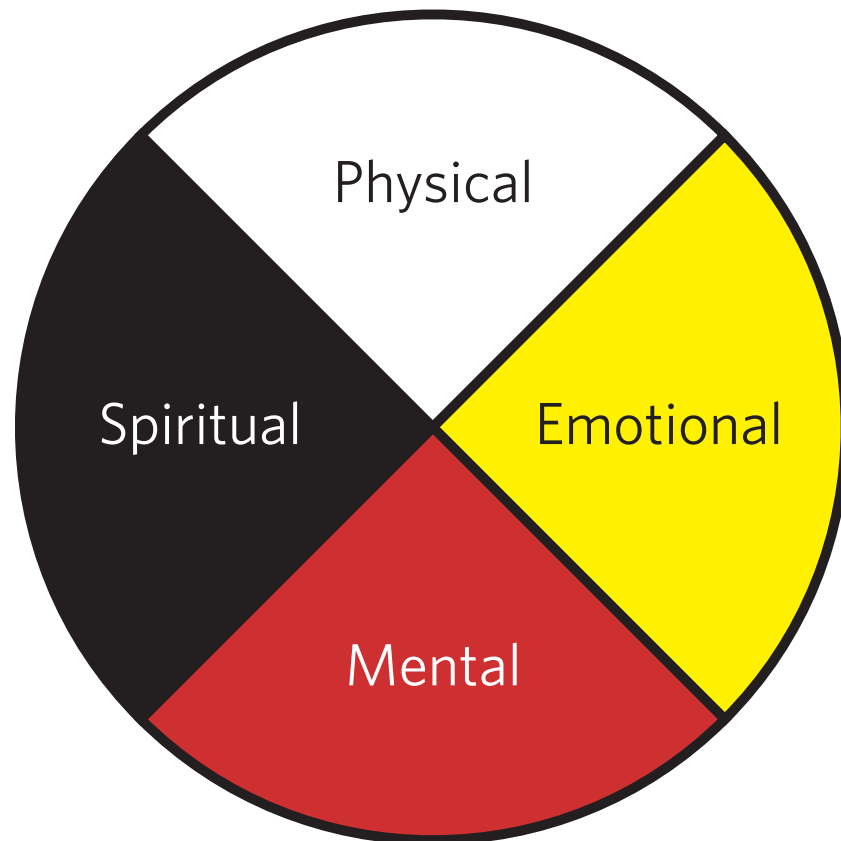
Tools for Success

In 2007, the province furthered a mandate to school districts to sign an *Enhancement Agreement* with the Aboriginal community. This Agreement articulates how Aboriginal children in the SD will receive educational services. It sets targets for improving the well-being and academic achievement of Aboriginal students. Timelines are associated with all goals. The AEC and the SD meet 4 times a year to review this performance data, programs, and budget expenditures.

To create an *Enhancement Agreement*, the Ministry helped out with the logistics by sending out both an Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employee to facilitate the creation of the Agreement. Again, forums were created to receive input from parents and the community. From these, the community recommended Medicine Wheel teachings as a way to set goals for FNIM students in all 4 areas (physical, intellectual, emotional, spiritual). These goals provide a basis for tracking students' achievements. Monitoring could begin as to how, for example, after a year had passed, did Aboriginal students' sense of belonging change? Are their incidents of tardiness and absences decreasing? There was also more conscious recognition of Aboriginal students in various ways.



The following four goals are based on a Medicine Wheel pedagogy that addresses the needs of the whole child. SD23 believes this is critical to student success.



Goal #1: EMOTIONAL: To increase a sense of belonging, self-respect, and pride of heritage for Aboriginal students.

Objective: Improve the attendance rates and decrease the tardiness rates of Aboriginal students. Increased Aboriginal student recognition in the areas of academia, athletics, citizenship, leadership and fine arts.

School District No. 23 believes that a student's sense of belonging is fundamental to his/her school success and overall wellbeing. District data indicates that absences and tardiness are higher for Aboriginal students than the general student population at the K-12 levels. Therefore, we are committed to implementing initiatives that increase Aboriginal students' positive sense of belonging, self-respect, pride of heritage and commitment to staying in school.

Increased and improved satisfaction survey participation from Aboriginal students: Students report a high level of satisfaction at the middle and secondary levels; 81% report doing well or very well in school with 85% satisfaction with the quality of education received.

Goal #2: SPIRITUAL: To increase awareness and knowledge of Aboriginal histories, traditions, cultures and languages.

Objectives: Increase number of Aboriginal students enrolled in an Okanagan Language program in elementary, middle and secondary schools. Increase number of Aboriginal students participating in school-based, district and community activities.

The teachings of Aboriginal histories, traditions, cultures and languages are critical to ensuring that this knowledge will be passed on to future generations of Aboriginal peoples. It also gives students a sense of pride of their rich and unique Aboriginal heritages. District data is showing that the objective of Aboriginal students participating in school-based and district activities is being met. Parent surveys show a high level of comfort and attachment to district schools. Parent, teacher and student comments speak to more Aboriginal students being actively engaged in school events.

Goal #3: PHYSICAL: To increase awareness of healthy choices that will enhance the physical wellbeing of Aboriginal students.

Objectives: Decrease the number of students hungry in school; increase students' participation in active living.

SD23 is making inroads with a number of schools for providing bag lunches, initiating breakfast clubs, and Advocates who provide nutritional snacks. Data shows a decreased number of students feeling hungry in school over the past five years, and more students bringing lunch to school. Parents have expressed appreciation with the Advocates' provision of food; 70% were satisfied or very satisfied with the healthy choices. Students who make healthy choices and live healthy lifestyles can participate more fully in their learning.

Goal #4: INTELLECTUAL: To improve K-12 Aboriginal student academic achievement.

Objectives: Increase graduation rate with Dogwood completion (The BC Certificate of Graduation or Dogwood Diploma is awarded upon successful completion of the provincial graduation requirements). Increase number of K-12 students fully meeting or exceeding expectations in reading, writing and numeracy.

Aboriginal students' performance in academic areas indicates that there needs to be a continued focus on improving the number of Aboriginal students meeting and/or exceeding grade-level expectations in reading, writing and numeracy. Improved student performances will lead to greater numbers of Aboriginal students receiving Dogwood graduation. In collaboration, the AEC and the SD set the six-year goal for student success at 90%. The SD report card results indicate that they are on target to meet this goal. Dogwood completion rate rose from 45% in 2002 to 60% in 2010. And more recently, 98% of Grade 7-9 Aboriginal students are demonstrating passing grades with 23.5% of students achieving A grades.



The SD is accountable for demonstrating how it meets the goals, using the District records derived by the Aboriginal Student Advocates and this culturally-based tool. Eventually, each SD in the Province will have its own *Enhancement Agreement*.

With the Enhancement Agreement goals set, staffing needs were addressed.

By the end of the 2012 school year,

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 98% of Grade 7-9 Aboriginal students are demonstrating passing grades with 23.5% of students achieving A grades.▪ District data indicated that for those students who start with the Program through to Grade 12, there is a success rate of 90%. | <p>the program employed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 32 Aboriginal Student Advocates,▪ 3 Certified Education Assistants,▪ 5 secondary teacher tutors,▪ 2 full-time clerical positions,▪ a Cultural Facilitator,▪ an Okanagan Language Instructor, and▪ a District Principal of Aboriginal Education Program (AEP).▪ Various local Aboriginal community members provide support to the cultural program as needed, and on a fee-for-services basis. |
|--|---|

The Principal oversees the entire AEP, and meets as an equal with other educators in the SD regarding Aboriginal education concerns. S/he also sits on the AEC to provide information on student performance, programming and budget expenditures.

Aboriginal Advocates are the vital link between Aboriginal students and the school system. Because they provide the unique perspective of a shared cultural heritage, they form the basis of a communication network among students, their families, and other school personnel. The importance of the Aboriginal Advocates position has been endorsed by the Human Rights Commission by their approval of preferential hiring of qualified people of Aboriginal heritage. Aboriginal Advocates' main duty is to help monitor students' growth in the 4 Medicine Wheel areas (physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional). They also maintain records of the services provided to students, which are then reviewed by the Aboriginal education and school site principals.

Relationship Structure

The Aboriginal Education Council (AEC) consists of local First Nations, Aboriginal agencies, parents and school boards: the Westbank First Nation, Okanagan Indian Band, Okanagan Nation Alliance, Ki-Low-Na Friendship Center, Lake Country Native Association, Kelowna Métis Association, an Aboriginal Education Committee Parent representative, and Central Okanagan SD23 (School Board Trustee, Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Aboriginal Education Program Principal, and Principal Representative).



The AEC meets 4 times a year and are now in the process of writing the second *Enhancement Agreement*. The Principal of the AEP (which is overseen by the AEC) is a member of the Westbank First Nation; her understanding and relationship to the community has been invaluable. There has been a noticeable clarity in communication between the SD and the communities. The AEC leadership and SD23 administration is a committed group of people who have weathered the storm of relationship-building as they work to honour their responsibility of improving education for Aboriginal children. *"These people are leading the way to a future where the educational achievements of Aboriginal children will be comparable to their peers"*, stated the Grand Chief of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs in 2006 at the signing of the first *Enhancement Agreement*.

OUTCOMES

Over the last 10 years, SD23 data (extracted through the use of data tools from Ministry of Education reports on student achievement) indicates a steady and constant improvement. The graduation rate in 2011-2012 increased to 69%; an increase of 9% from the 2010-2011 year. This figure is higher than the provincial average of 54%. District data also indicates that for those students who start with the Program through to Grade 12, there is a success rate of 90%.

Additional Information: Aboriginal Student Advocate's role (see also Appendix A "Position Description: Aboriginal Student Advocate")

1. The SD received a Human Rights exemption to hire only Aboriginal persons for the position of Aboriginal Student Advocate ("Advocate"). It was determined that Aboriginal students need role models of Native heritage to which to relate. This exemption also served to increase the SD's employment of Aboriginal people, and was accomplished through the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).
2. The original job postings required only Grade 12, but the newest postings ask for Human Service Worker or Social Work credentials. We actually get higher-educated people than this, but that is the minimum.
3. Advocates are allotted spaces in each school, so they can comfortably connect with each student. All progress with Aboriginal students is recorded and tracked to see if we are meeting the Enhancement Agreement Goals (agreement made with the Aboriginal community which is based on the Medicine Wheel – spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical needs of the child). The Advocate is the inter-linkage and connection with the families, the student, and the school.
4. There are 45 Advocates in SD23, and 42 schools. There are 2 and sometimes 3 Advocates in the Middle Grades (7 to 9) and Secondary Grades (10 to 12); tutors are hired for the Secondary Grades. The elementary schools do not receive as much access to Advocates who may be there 2 times a week, depending on the Aboriginal student population. Research showed that students were dropping out in Grade 10, so extra preventative support starts in Grade 7.



SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 73 (KAMLOOPS/THOMPSON)

Location, contact: First Nations Education Council, 225, 345 Chief Alex Thomas Way
Kamloops BC V2H 1H1 (250) 828-9807
www3.sd73.bc.ca/education/content/aboriginal-education

Enrolment: 2,130 Aboriginal students out of 13,500 total
Budget: \$2.4 million/school year

Overview

School District (SD) 73 is located within the traditional territory of the Secwepemc people. The seven First Nations are: Skeeetchestn, Adams Lake, Neskonlith, Little Shuswap, Tk'emlups, Whispering Pines/Canton and Simpcw. There are over 2,000 Aboriginal students who make up 15% of the SD's school population. The goal of the SD is to improve Aboriginal students' success, from K to 12.

For each student identified as Aboriginal, and with the parents' consent, there is a supplement of \$1,160 per year. This generates about \$2.5 million for Aboriginal SD 73 students. This is the money the FNEC can allocate for additional support, such as language revitalization, and cultural and academic support. These additional services are seen as supplemental to basic education.

Money from the province is allocated to SDs for supporting Aboriginal students' learning. Accountability by the SDs in the past for how this money was being used was weak, at best. After the Sullivan Report² on education was tabled and released, an unintended outcome was that, without question, Aboriginal students were faring poorly in the public school system. The results were so extreme they were shocking, particularly because the SDs were receiving extra money for Aboriginal students. This spotlight became the impetus for change, and the money flow was soon re-directed.

- **In the past 8 years, graduation rates went up to 69% and will soon be over 70%. (An increase of 25% in 8 years).**
- **41 First Nations education workers** in the SD manage student services, and record them.
- **Funding supports up to 15 Aboriginal programs per year** including: First Nation Education Worker program, alternative First Nations school for learners not fitting into the mainstream school system, language instruction, 5 First Nations Family Counsellors who address student social-emotional issues, transition to post-secondary initiative (oriented to university or university-equivalent), Four Directions teachings, teachers who help other teachers integrate Aboriginal content into provincial curriculum, early learning, oral language, getting ready to learn how to read (K1 students), engaging parents, and cultural education.

² This is technically called the *Report of the British Columbia Royal Commission on Education* (1988) written by B.M. Sullivan. See <http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/files/legacyforlearnerssummary.pdf>





History and Background

In 1991, the new NDP government began to implement change. It established a policy that targeted the money set aside for Aboriginal education. It was aimed at ensuring, through clear and unambiguous guidelines, that this money was to be used solely for furthering Aboriginal students' public schooling. Also, it was to evaluate the SDs' Aboriginal education programs in terms of enhancing their effectiveness and responsibility towards Native students, and determine how audits could support the appropriate use of those funds.

A collaborative consultation structure was set up so all stakeholder groups could be part of ensuring that the money would go specifically for Aboriginal learners, and that Aboriginal communities could give input as active partners. A part of this funding was used to consult and collaborate with families for language, culture and academic support. It was then that the First Nation Education Council (FNEC) was set up as the consultative structure and became the driving force for overseeing that the money for Aboriginal education truly went to benefit Aboriginal students. The FNEC sets the strategic plans that include the spending priorities, and built-in accountability measures.

In March 2010, educators from SD 73, FNEC members, Elders, school trustees and Aboriginal community members met to discuss the development of the 3rd *Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement* (these are renewed every 5 years).³ The session concluded that gains and improvements were made from working together and sharing the challenges. Strong leadership from the FNEC Chair facilitated SD 73 and Aboriginal communities' collaborative efforts. Collaboration also includes Metis, and non-status urban and on-reserve communities.

Participation from Aboriginal communities is strong, partly because the groups meet to work together on a regular basis, usually every 2 months. Sometimes the issue-solving process is straightforward and involves simply putting in a call and asking for help – *What can be done about this, please?*

Relationship Structure

The education of Aboriginal students is now guided by the FNEC which includes representatives from the 7 Secwepemc Bands (this may be the Chief, or someone he/she designates such as the councillor holding the Education portfolio), representatives from two urban Aboriginal organizations (the Friendship Centre, and a Métis representative), a representative from the Clearwater area, and two non-Aboriginal School Board trustees.

SD 73 also makes use of the First Nations Advisory Committee (FNAC) which is made up of teachers, First Nations support workers, principals, education coordinators from the seven Nations, and from the university. They know Aboriginal education from a front-line perspective and provide advice to political groups, such as the types of initiatives that need funding. They liaise, assess needs and ensure that program information is shared. About 20 direct stakeholders make up the FNAC.

Barriers in liaising with Aboriginal community

In the past, the groups (SDs, FNIM and the provincial ministry) did not trust each other because the history and past educational experiences of Aboriginal people tended to be genocidal in perspective.

³ Please see the end of this Case Study for more on Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements.





The SDs were leery about the process because they had to give up control of significant amounts of money. It was not easy to do that. But over the years, and with the collaborative structure up and running, the relationships and trust on all sides began to develop. For the First Nations, the people/parents/communities now know and feel they have a voice over the money that is allocated for their children's education. Now it is very much an active partnership arrangement and much more of a trusting relationship.

Despite these efforts, there are still districts in BC where the relationships are not positive. There are barriers between "urban and reserve". There are many changes in leadership that means different people at the table. Elections change dynamics, new people come in and the groups are always adjusting and re-adjusting to changes. While it does cause some disruption, overall the people's collective understanding and support of what we are doing keeps improving.

There are also "every-day" types of barriers – these are caused by situations where parents, for example, are displeased with how their child was dealt with – what the school saw as a desired outcome may not have been an example of sensitivity toward the Aboriginal student. These are situational, not permanent. Once people get together they figure out what happened and are assured that some agreed-on solutions will be found. In these cases, there are no formal protocols, much of how to deal with these issues has been developed through collective understanding and trust.

There are still allies to be made within the schools, such as with teachers and principals. They need to broaden their horizons, and become aware of how certain activities must change so Aboriginal students are more likely to be successful in their academic endeavours. However, we realize that some people take a long time to see things, and that social change is a long-term project.

How were these barriers addressed?

The leadership of the FNEC Chair who sits on many provincial and national education committees is a person that the communities believe in, on both sides. His leadership at the Band Council level was instrumental in founding the FNEC. When the Aboriginal communities and organizations saw true control, they felt more empowered and in positions to articulate what they saw as solutions to students' dilemmas. They had a voice at the table, control over the money that flowed because of their students. The SD began to have more faith in the process and realized that the initiatives were solid and strong, and that the money spent on them was very worthwhile. It was wise spending, not whimsical, and in accordance with consultation reports with FNIM communities and organizations.

Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements

Enhancement Agreements were established to show our accountability for spending money, articulate our responsibilities towards students, and demonstrate how Aboriginal youth achievement compares with that of non-Aboriginal students. These *Agreements* help keep us focused, and results are shared with the whole stakeholder group including the Ministry, and parents.

Their purposes are to:

- implement strategies and ensure full effort of school staff to improve the achievement and school success of all Aboriginal students



- enhance all students' understanding of and respect for Aboriginal culture, history and language
- enhance Aboriginal students' sense of belonging within schools and their personal belief that they can be successful in the public education system
- engage Aboriginal communities, parents, and Elders to participate in the attaining of the goals identified in the Agreement.

Goals of the Agreement include to:

- improve Primary Achievement results in Grades K-3 in Reading, Writing and Math
- improve Intermediate Foundation Skills in Grades 4-7 in Reading, Writing and Math
- increase elementary student enrolment in the Regular Academic Program
- maintaining student attendance at a minimum of 90%
- improve the graduation rate
- improve pass rates for provincial exams in English, Math and Social Studies
- increase student participation in Secwepemc language instruction
- expand opportunities for participation in Aboriginal cultural education for all students
- increase the number of Aboriginal Grade 12 graduates entering post-secondary programs, and
- increase the level of Aboriginal parent engagement/involvement at the school level.
- Parents have to agree to additional services for their children, and this is done through a letter that is sent to them. It is respectful and honours them as parents of valued children, and outlines the educational services available to the child. The Registration Form has a simple "check the box" for "self-identification".

OUTCOMES

Aboriginal people showed that they could manage these funds in an effective and responsible way. They spend money for services and programs, and related things that needed change. Over time, improved academic achievement rates could be seen.

In the past 8 years, graduation rates went up to 69% and soon it's going to be over 70%. Just 8 years ago, it was 44%; an increase of 25%. We need to sustain that increase, and keep improving it even more.

Forty-one First Nations education workers in the SD manage student services, and record them. We support about 10 or 15 programs such as: First Nation Education Worker program, alternative First Nations school for learners not fitting into the mainstream school system, language instruction, 5 First Nations Family Counsellors who address student social-emotional issues, transition to post-secondary initiative (oriented to university or university-equivalent), Four Directions teachings, teachers who help other teachers integrate Aboriginal content into provincial curriculum, early learning, oral language, getting ready to learn how to read (K1 students), engaging parents, and cultural education.

Additional Comments

There has been a perception by some that Aboriginal children cannot do well in school. That is not true. If their learning needs are met, and they are in loving and supportive environments that value them as individuals and collectively, they do extremely well academically.



OSKAYAK HIGH SCHOOL (GREATER SASKATOON CATHOLIC SCHOOL DIVISION)

Location, Contact: 919 Broadway Avenue, Saskatoon SK S7N 1B8
(306) 659-7730
www.oskayak.ca

Enrolment: 280 Aboriginal students
Budget: \$210,000 per year

Overview

Oskayak, a symbol of determination, is the outcome of community- and parent-drive to establish a school for urban Aboriginal youth who were having a difficult time fitting in with the public school system – students who either dropped out of school, or had been expelled. Oskayak is a First Nation school without Catholic rituals, and is more of an associate school. Like other schools, it receives an educational grant from the province. The school, not the Catholic Board, hires and evaluates the teachers, and “brokers” all main functions. It sees the Catholic contribution as a part of the healing of pain caused by the Church over its decades of residential schooling. The social justice commitment by the Catholic Board is “part of the hurt, part of the healing”. The school has had minor sporadic activity for Catholic students for enhancing their spiritual growth. Mainly, though, the traditions are Aboriginal.

Oskayak is administered as a special division of the Catholic School Board that became responsible for providing the facilities. The school concept is “to go big” since, as the high school graduating the most students in the province, it is now planning for nearby student residences.

The school is open to students of Aboriginal ancestry – mostly First Nations and Métis. It provides them with the opportunity to recapture their Aboriginal identity through academic and spiritual growth. When the school opened, honouring events included pipe ceremonies and offerings. These were conducted by Elders from the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College and many television crews filmed the events.

The school receives the \$210,000 grant from the Ministry. This funding level is the same amount allocated to the original Native Survival School in 1980. As such, school administration is always seeking new and increased funding for present and future student services. The school strongly believes that education is needed for strong leadership, and successful families and communities. It is always seeking active partnerships and has a solid liaison with Microsoft DreamSpark⁴ to help with organizing and developing the school’s technology programming.

Many students are parents themselves and utilize the school’s 9 daycare spaces, but about 30 more are needed. Most students are older teens, older than the age-grade “normal” of mainstream schooling. Some do not live with parents, some deal with alcoholism and addictions, suffer from poverty and have problems meeting their basic livelihood needs. Other student demographics:

4 See <https://www.dreamspark.com/>



- 82% use public transportation
- 94% rely on the student lunch program
- 41% currently have issues in the justice system
- 51 different First Nations are represented in the school
- 53% do not live with parents
- 37% live in emergency or subsidized housing
- 51% have addictions issues.

As well, many students lived their early childhood years within their home reserves, and are still very much tied to them. Administrators and staff recognize that school learning experiences must reflect their students' realities and work at relieving their basic life pressures.

History and Background

The origins of Oskayak were in pre- and early 1980s as the Saskatoon Native Survival School (SNSS). Eighteen months of organization and collaboration with nearby Native communities saw the emergence of the Parent Council that later developed a proposal leading to the school's establishment. An unusual tripartite Agreement involving the Parent Council, the Saskatoon Catholic School Board and the provincial Ministry of Education was signed. The SNSS was registered under the Societies Act in 1980 and as a non-profit corporation in 1982. Registration made a formal Agreement with the Catholic School Board and the Ministry of Education possible. The Saskatoon Native Survival Council (SNSC) became an entity directed by the Parent Council that represented the city's Aboriginal community; it negotiated contracts and participated in getting the School initiated and functioning.

The school has overcome a period of complacency (early to mid-1990s) when graduation rates fell, students were not attending regularly and high statistics on student achievement were dropping. The parents drifted away from the Council, and while many youth were still registering, the usual strong outcomes were slipping. By 2008, after an administrative clean up (which included a change in the superintendent and about 1/3 of the staff), the school got back "on-track". The new administrator challenged the parents, "put his foot down" to unconcerned students for poor attendance and demanded that they improve, and conducted surveys within the community to garner information on what parents and students wanted for their/their children's education. He looked at Best Practices in other jurisdictions to see what worked and what did not. The new administration implemented new accountability measures regarding finances and desired outcomes.

Information-seeking sessions revealed that students wanted the high-school credits to graduate and that they greatly valued the school's cultural programming. The school maintained these programs, but also adopted new communications technologies, and hired strong teachers who were gurus in the technology field to liven classroom learning. Action-based teaching became the norm, and was solution-based.

Barriers in liaising with Aboriginal community

Public school was inhospitable and a hostile place for Aboriginal children; it was an alienating experience for both students and parents. Children were isolated, age-grade displaced, ignored or ill-depicted in the curriculum, socially excluded, misunderstood and taught as if they were middle-





class white students. Consequently, dropout rates were extremely high: 90%+ in high schools and 60% in elementary schools. If these statistics applied to the population at large, the parents would be up in arms, demanding immediate reform and a complete overhaul of the educational system.

Over the years, though, Oskayak became self-satisfied and declined in the early 1990s; parents drifted away from their previous commitment to the school. Only 2 to 3 parents sat on the Parent Council and remaining members were from the community but did not have children in the school. The moral authority was with the school to fix things, so the administrator sat down with the only active parent of the Parent Council and brainstormed about what they should do. The only answer was to get the parents back, actively participating. They made a list of all the parents, split the list in half, and each taking one half, contacted these parents to again start proactively caring for their children's education.

Active partners were also sought, and recruited: academics, NGOs, corporations, the public sector and the provincial Ministry. They were needed to re-build the school's infrastructure that was rapidly eroding from lack of involvement.

Oskayak's administrators also held a student forum to find out what students' expectations were, what they wanted from school and what they felt was missing. (This is now done every year.) A student got up and appealed to his peers, and said, "You need to be here for the right reasons, we need to care about our future." The feedback received was outstanding and the support of the broader Native community and other allies started to build. There are now partnerships for advocacy, further education (post-secondary), and resources from Native professional groups.

The hardest community to engage was the parents. There are some strong reasons about parental non-involvement because about 1/3 of the student body do not have available parents at all, some parents are working long hours and going to school themselves. The school learned to rely on the community partners and allies while never giving up on trying to bring in the parents.

Co-governance is a big goal—with collaboration from First Nations education authorities, parents and the school. At first, the school was apolitical, but as time went on, it became clear that this outlook could not further the school. Now the Saskatchewan tribal councils (7 First Nations are close to the city) are partners, and while the school has to be political, it has always maintained local and community control. Oskayak now not only has the input of students and parents, but specific community agencies and organizations.

How were these barriers addressed?

A small nucleus of Native parents in the Saskatoon community took responsibility for the actuality of the school. They were the outcrop of the 1980s Native Survival Schools (NSS) movement where urban Aboriginal people were claiming a space for Aboriginal youth in publicly funded schools where they were faring poorly. Members of the Parents' Council were action-oriented to realize the NSS that evolved into the present-day Oskayak.

Parental and community action overcame complacency to the point where the school is again high in graduation rates. New administrative thought was inculcated within the school that involved students, staff, parents and the community. Students want to be at Oskayak, and are starting to





realize their potential again. In one case, 4 young women wanted to go into nursing but there was no chemistry offered at the school. Administrators found on-line sciences courses for them, so now they and other students can continue on in nursing and other areas where mathematics and sciences are core.

Overcoming barriers with students' social issues is through outreach to partners, as the school recognizes it cannot accomplish this on its own. It utilizes groups that support justice, such as school workers, addictions counsellors, childcare centres, transportation drivers, and other community resources. On the learning side, the school hires qualified teachers, and has learned how to retain them, provides professional development, is active in problem-based learning, works with the university, and teaches a locally developed biodiversity course. Students learn all the academic content but in the context of problem solving. For example, the school needs an outdoor play area for the students' children, so the students design this area – which colors to use, types of plants they want, size of sand pits, and so on. In learning the content, they learn how to cope with their realities, and how to plan to meet their and their children's needs. They actually see the fruits of their labour because their children attend that school daycare. The school uses this “hands-on” approach to learning, and the students are very responsive to it.

The administrator says, **“We don’t just get along, we are at the cutting edge of teaching/learning innovative pedagogical orientation.”** Once, too, Oskayak hired a mathematics teacher who was not quite academically qualified, but was active in getting students involved in any area. The students reacted strongly and positively to him and his teaching methodology. While there was anxiety that the students would not pass their departmental exams, the results proved otherwise. All 18 students passed with marks between 68 and 88, marks that are very high.



The social and teaching milieu of the school is compatible with the students' heritage and ways-of-learning. Oskayak uses beading patterns for teaching various geometric concepts and as many related traditional activities as possible to teach certain points.

This type of delivery gets very good results while reinforcing cultural traditions.

Partnerships help alleviate students' social barriers. Agreements are made with the city for public transportation passes which contribute to high attendance rates. Funding for the Nutrition Program comes from the Potash Corporation; other partners contribute to the resources needed for culture enhancement and other academic-related necessities.



CHILDREN OF THE EARTH HIGH SCHOOL (WINNIPEG SCHOOL DIVISION)

Location, contact: 100 Salter Street, Winnipeg MB R2W 4J6
(204) 589-6383
www.wsd1.org/cote/

Enrolment: 225 Aboriginal students
Budget: No figure available

Overview

Established in 1991, the Children of the Earth (COE) is an Aboriginal High School in Winnipeg's North End that emphasized Aboriginal culture, language and academics: a school that aims to recover and adhere to the lessons of the ancestors, and validates the concept of Aboriginality in the education system. It allows First Nations youth the freedom to practice their culture in an environment where it was once strictly prohibited. The school was created after consultation with the Winnipeg School Division, various community groups such as the *Thunder Eagle Society*, *Urban Aboriginal Educational Advisory Committee* and parent groups. The name "Children of the Earth" was submitted by a student, and adopted.

Children of The Earth (COE) has evolved into a centre for heritage language instruction, cultural activities and the incorporation of Aboriginal perspectives into current Manitoba curricula.

Two full-time cultural advisors are employed through the School Division; the Winnipeg School Division devised a category of employee called *Cultural Advisor* so these positions could fit into the school employee structure. These advisors, one male and one female, do not help the students academically. They set up and facilitate all the cultural programming, such as for sweat lodges, and guided the students spiritually. As there was no industrial arts program, the students were steered into cultural learning experiences instead.

Once or twice a month (including in mid-September of every year), we hire a bus, load up all 235 students to spend the entire day outside. This is a Cultural Day is set aside for on the land teachings. For example:

- Medicine walks. The Advisors teach students which plants are herbs, what their medicinal uses and values are, and their spiritual meanings. The students come back with bags of herbs that last the year.
- Zoo tour. The Advisors want the students to see the animals that our traditional stories referred to; i.e. the bison, bear, buffalo, birds and many smaller animals. The animal teachings were also done at the zoo. It was conceptualized that, when the students become parents, they will take their own children to the zoo, into an environment that perpetuates what they saw and learned in their youth about the traditional animal and bird teachings.



History and Background

In 1988, the Winnipeg School Division, in consultation and cooperation with various community groups such as the *Thunder Eagle Society*, *Urban Aboriginal Educational Advisory Committee* and parent groups, began what was considered an audacious undertaking.

By 2001, the “growing pains” were practically over. From its inception to 2001, COE had not done well in terms of improving student achievement. This was obvious because these were the years when exam results were published and COE’s were low. The lesson learned was not to replace cultural offerings at the expense of academic learning. Strong academics must be stressed, period.

This was dealt with by, instead of conducting cultural activities every day, it was every 3rd day. When the school first opened, the excitement within staff tended towards a strong emphasis on teaching culture and traditions which, unfortunately, weakened an emphasis on academic instruction.

Teachers had to learn how to incorporate the concepts of Aboriginal teachings into curriculum delivery. For example, when teaching geometry, we set up tipis as there was the space for it, and the students learned all about angles, circles, circumferences, etc. It was “hands-on” experience and paralleled Aboriginal students’ preferential learning styles.

Aboriginal youth, in other schools, perceived and lived with racism; at COE, their comfort level increases because they see other students and teachers just like themselves and this enhances feelings of safety and belonging. Non-Aboriginal students are a minority and do not exhibit racism towards their Aboriginal peers.

From 90% to 100% of students are Aboriginal. Non-Aboriginal youth who attend are entitled to be there, but they usually are enrolled because they want to be with their friends. They are made aware, before registering, what to expect.

Barriers in liaising with Aboriginal community

There were many conflicts to begin with. For example, the building was designed with Aboriginal people in mind and architecturally based on spirit guides. But it was never meant to be COE, and part of the issue was to get it as a COE school building. Originally, it was meant for Argyle, an alternative school which was in the system well before COE.

A lot of community felt it was segregation of Aboriginal students (except that segregation is separation by force, not by will). Many felt the curriculum was not good. However, there were 2 Aboriginal trustees on the school board who were very active in re-developing the curriculum. The parents who approached the *White Buffalo Spiritual Society* and did the negotiating also did the negotiations with the Board to iron out inconsistencies.

The traditional spirituality and being Aboriginal was disappearing in the curriculum which did not recognize Aboriginality at all, and this needed to be changed. This had been denied to Aboriginal parents and grandparents when they were in residential schools, and now was exactly what they wanted for their own children as students.





Also, students receive conflicting messages from home and at school. They get one worldview at home, and another Eurocentric one at school. At home, they are told by parents and grandparents to listen to the teacher, and that the key to success is to embrace education and respect the Eurocentric teachings. Yet the schools are rejecting them just the same, so this does not work very well. Young students are not taught how to negotiate these differences because parents and grandparents were never taught how to do this.

Some Aboriginal people do not fully know their cultures- there is a void of knowledge because it was taken away in residential school and through other types of schooling. So Aboriginal youth struggle in school trying to validate their own identity. The void exists for all Native epistemologies and knowledge systems.

How were these barriers addressed?

The Aboriginal community was very accepting and supportive of COE. The principal took an apolitical stance without favouring any particular group, and did not get involved with competing politically. All FNIM remain welcome and equally supported. Because COE falls under the Winnipeg School Division, all students living in the area can attend.

People in the right positions believed strongly in the need for a school like COE. They foresaw the tangible outcomes of the reality of Aboriginal students struggling in school, and not doing well.

Additional Comments

The school community defined "Aboriginal" as a set of positives instead of issues as a place to start COE. The educational program content and delivery were made to be relevant to the needs of FNIM students. This attitude shift can become the catalyst for ensuring that education is accepted by Aboriginal students, and essential to increasing the current graduation levels.

NIJI MAHKWA ABORIGINAL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL (WINNIPEG SCHOOL DIVISION)

Location, contact: 450 Flora Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R2W 2R8 (204) 589-6742
www.winnipegssd.ca/schools/NijiMahkwa/Pages/default.aspx

Enrolment: 343 Aboriginal students

Budget: No figure available

Overview

Niji Mahkwa is an *Aboriginal Elementary School* was established in September 1993. The name “Niji Mahkwa” was submitted by a student of the school and was chosen by the community and parent group.

Niji Mahkwa School sees the child as a sacred being, and as such, those walking along a child’s learning path in any way must always be cognizant of the holistic nature of that child’s development: mental, spiritual, physical and emotional. Formal schooling often fulfils only the mental component, but the school works at developing all 4 areas because the emotions, body and spirit do impact on children’s mental or academic achievement.

Niji Mahkwa’s academic vision is includes the total (holistic) fulfillment of every child who is enrolled. The school’s goals are to:

- provide the academic programming reflected in the provincial standards and outcomes
- collectively develop and maintain a safe environment that nurtures self-worth, self-discipline, increased awareness of inner resources and a stronger identity in all students
- promote, develop and empower family, extended family, spiritual guides and teachers and community members as equal partners – they have rights and responsibilities as pro-active participants in their children’s education
- teach respect for, and honouring spiritual guides and teachers
- ensure the preservation, appreciation and utilization of traditional languages by offering Cree and Ojibwe instruction as compulsory subjects (other languages may be offered in the future)
- **promote a balanced lifestyle by incorporating cultural teachings that meet the students’ spiritual, emotional, physical and mental needs. These teachings are based on the Seven Teachings as adopted by Niji Mahkwa parents, community, staff and students: to cherish knowledge is to know wisdom; to know love is to find peace; to honour creation is to have respect; courage is to face life with integrity; honesty in facing a situation is brave; humility is to know yourself as a sacred part of creation; and, truth is to know all these things.**

To help build and reinforce community trust and collaboration, *Niji Mahkwa’s* Medicine Conceptual Framework and Timeline consists of:

- Northern Doorway, Winter (December to February), Helper > love/wisdom/humility; Circle/ Feast Units of Pipe/Storytelling teachings
- Eastern Doorway, Spring (March to May), Infant > humility; Sweat Lodge/Vision Quest Units; Vision quest/Water teachings
- Southern Doorway, Summer (June-August), Child/Youth > honesty/truth; Celebration Unit; Feather teachings



- Western Doorway, Fall (September to November), Adult > respect/courage/love; Smudge/Pipe/Circle Units; medicine, sweat, tipi teachings

The staff, committed to implementing strong academic programming, integrates and utilizes the *Manitoba Education and Training* renewal standards and outcomes documents to plan and organize academic material. They work include cultural and language instruction into the curriculum, and also computer technology. Subjects taught in Shops are: Home Economics, Woods, Metals and Graphics. The *Assessment Strategies* and *Profiling System* used in the school plays a major role in determining the best learning paths for each student.

An alternative program of *Niji Muhkwa* is Songide'ewin that is located at 484 Selkirk Avenue. A satellite program, it offers Grades 8-S3 courses to students ages 13-21. Students are able to work on individualized programs at their own pace, and can receive regular general level credits. A breakfast and lunch program, as well as some transportation is provided.

Inclusion of parents in their children's learning through these activities:

- parent classes
- homework club with parents and students
- men's support group
- harvest club
- youth group activities
- heritage fair
- student-led conferencing cultural activities – classroom feasts

History and Background

As with *Children of the Earth*, the *Thunder Eagle Society* and various parent groups had been working closely with the Winnipeg School Division to provide opportunities for young Aboriginal children to learn their language and culture. A specific building had to be identified that would become this Aboriginal elementary school. There were many discussions regarding this, and eventually, Aberdeen School was chosen. The Winnipeg School Division worked diligently assisting new teachers and preparing the staff for the work ahead.

The school and Aboriginal community are actively involved, and value the belief that all children have an inherent right to the highest quality of holistic education.

Barriers in liaising with Aboriginal community

The steps for starting a school are complicated and lengthy and it was difficult to start the process. It was a lot of work determining the needs of the school (such as the actual building needed, developing the facilities and finding the right staff, teachers) bringing the community to make specific decisions about the best way of achieving their children's academic success.

How were these barriers addressed?

Strong leadership addressed many barriers. Leadership was collaborative, actively seeking parent/community participation who participated in decision-making and taking leadership of specific activities.

Case Studies Comparison

The Five Actions for Aboriginal Student Success

1. Establish and increase school board commitment

Kelowna, BC 2,133 Aboriginal students (10% of total) \$2.5 million/school year (\$1,172/student) 45 Aboriginal program positions	Kamloops, BC 2,130 Aboriginal students (16% of total) \$2.4 million/school year (\$1,126/student) 41 Aboriginal program positions	Saskatoon, SK 280 Aboriginal students \$280,000/school year (\$1,000/student)	Winnipeg, MB 568 Aboriginal Students (Both schools combined) Budgets not available
- Established and committed to 5 guiding principles - Links funding to self-identification, and is transparent in the budget expenditures. - Has Enhancement Agreement (EA) in place that clearly outlines school board commitment, responsibility along with targets, timelines and accountability measures. - Funds and sits on Aboriginal Education Committee that reviews EA - Integrates community feedback from forums into policy - Collects data in a manner that respects Aboriginal tradition (taking into account both individual and contextual details) - Hires Aboriginal people to fill Aboriginal-specific roles. Received Human Rights exemption for this, to ensure Aboriginal students have role models and staff with whom they can relate.	- Links funding to self-identification, and is transparent in the budget expenditures. - Has Enhancement Agreement (EA) in place that clearly outlines school board commitment, responsibility along with targets, timelines and accountability measures. - Funds and sits on Aboriginal Education Committee that reviews EA - Integrates community feedback from forums into policy - Collects data in a manner that respects Aboriginal tradition (taking into account both individual and contextual details) - Hires Aboriginal people to fill Aboriginal-specific roles.	- Links funding to self-identification, and is transparent in the budget expenditures. - Has Agreement in place that clearly outlines school board commitment, responsibility along with targets, timelines and accountability measures. - Funds and sits on Aboriginal Education Committee that reviews EA - Integrates community feedback from forums into policy - Hires Aboriginal people to fill Aboriginal-specific roles.	- Has Agreement in place that clearly outlines school board commitment, responsibility along with targets, timelines and accountability measures. - Integrates community feedback from forums into policy - Hires Aboriginal people to fill Aboriginal-specific roles.



2. Create outreach, self-identification and linkages among Aboriginal students and families;

Kelowna, BC 2,133 Aboriginal students (10% of total) \$2.5 million/school year (\$1,172/student) 45 Aboriginal program positions	Kamloops, BC 2,130 Aboriginal students (16% of total) \$2.4 million/school year (\$1,126/student) 41 Aboriginal program positions	Saskatoon, SK 280 Aboriginal students \$280,000/school year (\$1,000/student)	Winnipeg, MB 568 Aboriginal Students (Both schools combined) Budget not available
- Clearly links self-identification to student/family benefits and attains parental consent - Seeks regular feedback from parents: - Yearly community forums for general feedback but also to include parents in specific decision making - Links feedback directly to action - Sets yearly goal to have parent surveys show high level of comfort and attachment to schools - Parent representative on Aboriginal Education committee which meets 4 times per year - Has Aboriginal meeting spaces and opportunities for Aboriginal parents to network, interact, share ideas and bring ideas forward - Hires Aboriginal people as student advocates – form a communication network between students, families and school personnel. - Has formal agreements with the community partners (band councils, organizations, parents) that shows accountability, relationship and trust-building	- Clearly links self-identification to student/family benefits and attains parental consent - Formal letter is sent to parents outlining the additional services for their children. Self-identification is a simple check-box on student registration form - Holds regular community consultations - uses feedback in policy and enhancement agreements - Reports to community on results - Has First Nations Education Council as formal consultation structure for all stakeholder groups – ensures Aboriginal communities can give input as active partners - Hires Aboriginal employees to improve home/school liaisons especially in early schooling	- School's guiding principles include community/parent shared responsibility for education - School developed by parental drive and community consultation - Uses multiple methods to connect to parents: - Parental council developed through First Nations consultation and has representation from city's Aboriginal community - Uses engaged parents as volunteers to connect with other parents - parental surveys - Holds student forums - School is co-governed by First Nations education authorities, parents and the school – with community control.	- The term Aboriginal is written as positives in policy, versus a series of issues or problems - Parents informed before registering their child(ren) the services of the school - Actual school and its name developed in consultation with community - Parents viewed as equal partners - Uses multiple methods to connect to parents: - Parenting classes - Homework club with parents and students - Men's support group - Harvest club - Heritage fair - Classroom feasts - Consults with parents and other Aboriginal organizations to solve Aboriginal education problems - Ensures Aboriginal representation on School Boards - Hires Aboriginal staff to work with students



3. Meet urgent needs of Aboriginal students;

Kelowna, BC 2,133 Aboriginal students (10% of total) \$2.5 million/school year (\$1,172/student) 45 Aboriginal program positions	Kamloops, BC 2,130 Aboriginal students (16% of total) \$2.4 million/school year (\$1,126/student) 41 Aboriginal program positions	Saskatoon, SK 280 Aboriginal students \$280,000/school year (\$1,000/student)	Winnipeg, MB 568 Aboriginal Students (Both schools combined) Budget not available
- Identified gap in academic achievement and graduation rates for Aboriginal students - Native Student Advocates identify specific student issues (academic, behavioural, social), and monitor student's growth based on medicine wheel concepts. They maintain records and provide support. - Identifies early the children who are at-risk on Early Literacy Screener and failing core subjects – and provide immediate support (i.e. individual education plan). - Sets targets for well-being of students (i.e. hunger, cultural pride), not just academic achievement - Assesses student's performance in academic areas and provides tutoring - Evaluates non-academic measures of success: sense of belonging, incidence of tardiness/absences.	- Identified gap in academic achievement and graduation rates for Aboriginal students - Hires Aboriginal advocates to improve home/school liaisons - Hires First Nations Family Counsellors to support student social-emotional issues - Eliminates all evidence of racial bias on school transportation and premises - Provides counselling and advice to Aboriginal students to prepare them for living and working in Canadian society. - Provides multiple programs targeting unique needs of Aboriginal students: language programs, traditional teachings, teachers who help other teachers integrate Aboriginal culture into provincial curriculum, reading programs and transitioning to post-secondary.	- Identified gap in academic achievement and graduation rates - Works to relieve basic life pressures (i.e. provides day-care for students who are parents, food program, housing referrals) - Ensures school learning experiences reflect their students realities - Hires Aboriginal people as counsellors for any social issues - Aboriginal learning environment eliminates racism and cultural bias of dominant societies	- Identified gap in academic achievement and graduation rates - Assess student's learning needs and link them to appropriate education experiences - Aboriginal learning environment eliminates racism and cultural bias of dominant societies - Hire Aboriginal staff to increase sense of belonging - Provides instruction on how to live in two worlds - Developed curriculum based on student needs



4. Improve self-confidence and academic achievement of Aboriginal students

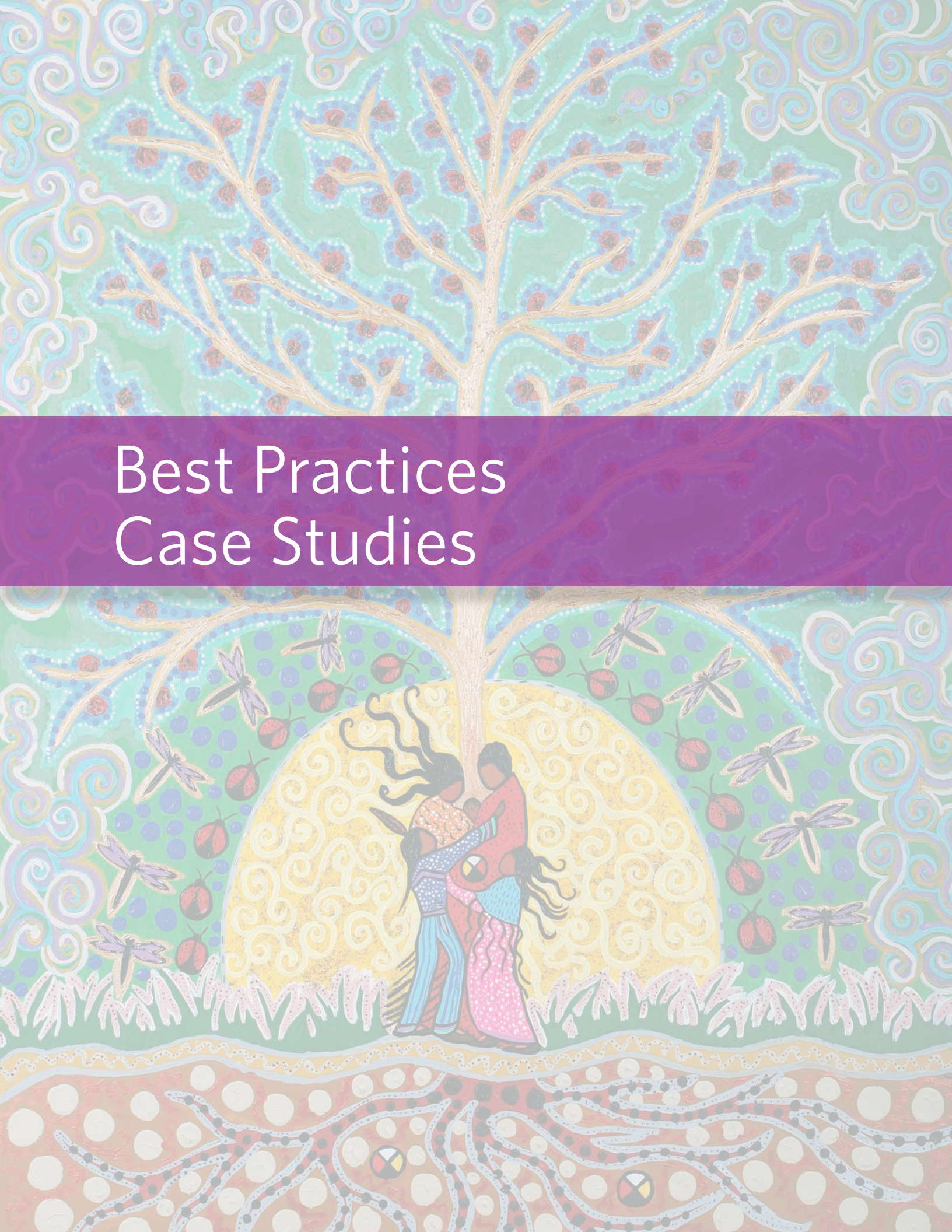
Kelowna, BC 2,133 Aboriginal students (10% of total) \$2.5 million/school year (\$1,172/student) 45 Aboriginal program positions	Kamloops, BC 2,130 Aboriginal students (16% of total) \$2.4 million/school year (\$1,126/student) 41 Aboriginal program positions	Saskatoon, SK 280 Aboriginal students \$280,000/school year (\$1,000/student)	Winnipeg, MB 568 Aboriginal Students (Both schools combined) Budget not available
- Academic success is one of their five guiding principles - Enhancement Agreement that sets targets and timelines for academic improvement using Medicine Wheel concepts - Aboriginal Education Committee meets 4 times per year to review performance data - Sets specific goal of 90% student success rate 45 staff employed with sole purpose of Aboriginal student success (including advocates, tutors and cultural facilitator) - Creates Aboriginal-specific spaces/ classrooms in each school - Partners (band councils, teachers, parents) implement team approach with focus on student retention and academic success - Ensures preventive measures. Example: research showed high drop-out rates in Grade 10 so extra supports were created starting in Grade 7.	- Enhancement Agreement that sets goals for academic success and outlines a shared responsibility between all partners. - Formally developed Aboriginal curriculum for all students - Allows incremental learning 41 First Nations education workers employed with sole purpose of Aboriginal student success. - Assists Aboriginal students in preserving and promoting their languages (i.e. historical narrations in classroom experiences). Language seen as vital part of education. - Uses Aboriginal volunteers as role models for students. - Focuses on families including promoting adult education and improving living conditions - Creates Aboriginal-specific spaces in schools. - Partners (band councils, teachers, parents) implement team approach with focus on student retention and academic success	- Set goals for student success - Evaluates graduation rates and other success indicators on regular basis - Bridges required subjects with traditional ways of learning (i.e. beadwork to teach geometric concepts) - Identifies student needs. If school does not have courses required to meet those needs, staff find on-line resources to ensure student success. - Hires qualified Aboriginal teachers and advocates. Considers cultural competencies beyond teaching certification. - Engages students in problem-solving experiential learning (i.e. students developed outside learning garden) - Families and community partners share responsibility of student success	- Aboriginal school – rather than an Aboriginal program within mainstream school - Welcomes non-Aboriginal students into Aboriginal school - Formally developed Aboriginal curriculum that includes holistic view of learning - Integrates Provincial standards and outcomes documents into culturally-based curriculum - Hire Aboriginal staff including 2 Cultural advisors employed with cultural education as sole purpose - Assesses each child on 'preferential learning styles - Traditional teachings provide the framework or structure for classes including hands-on experiences - Assessment of student success is continuous and cumulative



5. Increase cultural understanding of all staff and students

Kelowna, BC 2,133 Aboriginal students (10% of total) \$2.5 million/school year (\$1,172/student) 45 Aboriginal program positions	Kamloops, BC 2,130 Aboriginal students (16% of total) \$2.4 million/school year (\$1,126/student) 41 Aboriginal program positions	Saskatoon, SK 280 Aboriginal students \$280,000/school year (\$1,000/student)	Winnipeg, MB 568 Aboriginal Students (Both schools combined) Budget not available
- Has Aboriginal-specific curriculum - Includes culture in their 5 guiding principles - Uses Medicine Wheel as a pedagogy tool to set targets for student achievement - Cultural understanding and knowledge is a specific success indicator - Has a Cultural Facilitator position whose sole purpose is cultural integration and knowledge transfer - Has Language Instructor - Hires community members as cultural experts on ongoing basis for all students (does NOT rely on teachers to do this) - Has Student Advocates who support student success using Medicine Wheel as pedagogy focus. - Ensures the highest quality and most authentic cultural teachings are being circulated within the district through Cultural facilitator and community experts - Cultural presentations are a separate program and not an add-on to teachers or advocates roles. - Cultural tools are consistent across the district	- Has Aboriginal-specific curriculum - Staff assist students in preserving and promoting their heritage and languages - Staff supports teachers improve their knowledge through formal presentations and staff training days - Bring Elders into classrooms for traditional teachings - Uses Elders for language instruction - Enhancement Agreement has specific objectives regarding cultural knowledge	- Ensures curriculum has Aboriginal-content. - When school first opened, held traditional honouring events like pipe ceremony and offerings. This ensured that traditions were meaningfully included from the beginning. - Keeps students in touch with their home communities by engaging Elders they may be close with, and paying attention to events that may be happening on reserve. - Bridges required subjects with traditional ways of learning (i.e. beadwork to teach geometric concepts) - Partners with other organizations for resources for culture enhancement programs.	- Integrates cultural activities into current Manitoba curriculum - Vision of schools includes holistic perspective - Ensures culture is daily practice within schools - Offers language instruction as compulsory subject - Sets spaces for cultural learning – i.e. tipis or classroom space - Hires cultural advisors for all cultural programming and spiritual guidance of students. - Receives feedback and ideas from teachers on Aboriginal-specific activities and vets them through the cultural advisors. - Sets time monthly for “Culture Days” where they take students on the land to engage in cultural activities (i.e. medicine walks, animal teachings etc.) - Hires community experts (Elders, artists, singers, dancers etc.) for cultural programming





Best Practices Case Studies

Best Practices for Aboriginal Education a Summary

Below is a summary of best practices shared by all 5 case studies that connect directly to the five key areas that have been demonstrated to support Aboriginal student success.

1. Establish and increase school board commitment

- Develop Enhancement Agreement (EA) outlining Aboriginal education as a written priority. In collaboration with parents and communities, clearly outlines objectives, funding structure, targets, timelines, evaluation and accountability measures within the (EA)
- Develop and play active role in Aboriginal Education Committee or Council.
- Develop self-identification policy that is simple and respectful of Aboriginal families, and user-friendly for school personnel.
- Work with Human Rights legislation to ensure Aboriginal people are hired for Aboriginal positions such as Aboriginal education liaisons, specialists and consultants.

2. Create outreach, self-identification and linkages among Aboriginal (First Nation, Inuit and Métis) students and families

- Clearly link self-identification to student/family benefits and attain parental consent
- Have an education committee as accountability mechanism for Enhancement Agreements (including academic targets, timelines, and budget expenditures). This committee has representation from school boards, parents, educators and community
- Hire Aboriginal people to be connection between Aboriginal students, families, communities and other school personnel

3. Meet urgent needs of Aboriginal students

- Identify any gaps (academic achievement, graduation rates etc.) for Aboriginal students
- Provide counselling and support for unique needs of students (i.e. transitioning to post-secondary, family issues, lack of food, understanding dominant cultures with respect to Aboriginal culture)
- Hire Aboriginal people to support Aboriginal students through tutoring, advocacy and cultural guidance.

4. Improve self-confidence and academic achievement of Aboriginal students

- Have Aboriginal-specific spaces and/or classrooms to create place of belonging for Aboriginal students and their families
- Set clear goals for academic improvements with timelines and evaluation mechanisms
- Integrate traditional teachings and styles of learning into core subjects

5. Increase cultural understanding of all staff and students.

- Place cultural education on a equal level as other Western-based EuroCanadian offerings (provide equitable funding and human resources)
- Create and implement Aboriginal-specific curriculum for all students
- Offer language instruction
- Hire Aboriginal community experts (Elders, craftspeople, dancers etc.) for cultural instruction.



BEST PRACTICES

Central Okanagan, BC – School District No. 23, Aboriginal Education Program

SCHOOL BOARDS

- School boards (SBs) must veer away from short-term (or immediate-term) piecemeal types of activities that, while well intentioned, are limited in terms of increasing Aboriginal student success rates. SDs must look at the “Big Picture”, and implement a vision with activities belonging to a clear identified conceptual framework – one that is developed through active Aboriginal participation. This way, the “Big Picture” of how to achieve goals and the ways to derive them are clear to all stakeholders.
- Collect data in a manner that is respectful of Aboriginal tradition; it is important to capture individual as well as contextual details. Recognizing in concrete ways, the validity of epistemologies other than those prevalent in Canada and ensuring that privacy legislation is not violated during data collection processes. Example: Medicine Wheel Pedagogy
- When setting goals, associate them with time durations. Otherwise, goals may never be fulfilled and become vague and ambiguous.
- Develop baseline data in many relevant categories, and update it each year. This helps to determine annual targets, indicators, and strategies that are realistic and attainable and also show the expected increased growth rate. The statement that it takes a whole community to raise a child is true, and this SDs collaboration with Aboriginal communities and parents has proved that.
- **Formal agreements signify the commitment of the entire community and SD to ensure that Aboriginal education needs are being properly addressed – a shared responsibility that creates success for the children, accountability, relationship and trust building.**

RESOURCES

- An Advocate is required for tracking service delivery: who is receiving academic support, how often and in what subject. This information, invaluable in documentation that is critical to passing an audit, is detailed on a special Excel spreadsheet that the SD has designed.
- The Aboriginal Advocate provides academic support to Aboriginal students only. However, if an Aboriginal student is working on a group project with peers, it is appropriate for the Advocate to work also with non-Aboriginal students.
- SBs must provide the necessary resources to reinforce the imageries of and opportunities for youth in education as community priorities. This includes the creation of public meetings/ meeting places, opportunities for parents to network, interact and share ideas, and help bring those ideals into fruition.
- SBs must understand that educators/teachers who provide cultural inclusion and enrichment programming for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children cannot provide the cultural expertise themselves. This cultural competency must come from Aboriginal experts within the community – providing support to both teachers and the experts who are brought in. This financial and administrative support must be provided through the Aboriginal program (funded by the SB).
- Aboriginal educational partners (such as councils, programs, agreements, First Nations) are essential to team approaches that work towards improving student retention and academic success.



STUDENT - BELONGING

- To achieve a comfort level for Aboriginal students in schools, the school must be seen, and felt to be, a safe environment for expression and a place where they encounter other Aboriginal people. These can be as staff, such as secretaries, clerks, principals, teachers, teaching assistants, tutors, volunteers, trades and maintenance persons, parents and support staffers. Example: Aboriginal Student Advocates.
- Aboriginal students need role models to further their own educational/career ideals. Schools can house visible reflections of Aboriginal life: past and present. Think about artwork in the hallways, or pictures of FNIM leaders, or teaching Aboriginal literature. This is particularly relevant because Aboriginal people are the fastest growing and youngest ethno-cultural group in Canada, and more Aboriginal children/youth are entering the school system.
- Ensure that academic support is available for Aboriginal students (e.g., knowledgeable tutors who are empathetic about issues facing Aboriginal people).
- cultural support for Aboriginal students identified with the 118C Special Education designation should also qualify for ASA academic support.
- The school should provide the capacity of support staff to benefit Aboriginal students as individuals. Not all Aboriginal children are the same – they come from different cultures (e.g., First Nations, Métis and Inuit), different homes, and have different needs. When one's needs are identified, and are fulfilled, students do their work and do it well.

COMMUNITIES & FAMILIES

- As a principle, those most affected by a challenge must be included in strategy discussions that address the challenges. Eliminating the educational achievement gaps among Aboriginal student bodies requires meaningful involvement of Aboriginal peoples in government and private sector areas.
- Receiving feedback from the community/families/parents/guardians of Aboriginal students is respectful and yields windfalls in terms of successful outcomes for Aboriginal students. Ensure that as many decisions as possible are made by FNIM parents/guardians and communities.
- **Ensure that Aboriginal “self-identification” means that those who self-identify qualify for:**
 - support for those who struggle with the regular core curriculum
 - cultural support at all levels
 - support for primary Aboriginal students who are identified as “at risk” on the Early Literacy Screener and are minimally meeting expectations in literacy and/or numeracy
 - support for intermediate/middle school Aboriginal students who are achieving a C- or C grade and “at risk” of failing core subject areas
 - support for Aboriginal students working on an adapted/modified Individual Education Plan (IEP) and qualify for the services of an Aboriginal Support Advocate (ASA)
 - additional support for those also receiving ASA services
- SD employees, FNIM families, students and communities must be held accountable and responsible for supporting Aboriginal students in academic achievement. Hiring Advocates and a Cultural Facilitator has increased FNIM student success, and so has having an Aboriginal Council that oversees the spending and programming for Aboriginal education.
- Find effective ways of reaching out to Aboriginal communities – find advice and helpful suggestions from empathetic Aboriginal people/organizations if you, as a SB, do not know how this is best accomplished. Ensure there are seats on the committee for community experts.



CULTURE

- Strong belief in cultural expression is important. SBs should ensure there are resources available to deliver these, and also ensure that curricula going out to the SD are authentic (not stereotypical). Everything should be vetted through the AEP (or equivalent) before it goes out. The hiring of presenters who deliver the cultural presentations must be monitored in terms of, for example, ensuring that criminal record checks are completed.
- Establish a program that provides just cultural presentations. It is unrealistic to expect Advocates (student support staff) to devise and conduct this type of presentation as they must also provide academic and emotional support for Aboriginal students. This type of program will prevent “burn-out” among Advocates.
- Implement cultural tools that are consistent throughout the school. Also, when non-traditional tools are used, this should be explained to students. (e.g., the Medicine Wheel is not Indigenous to all First Nations and when it is used in these areas, students should be informed of this).
- SBs must be proactive and share their educational power. There is more to education than the pure Western-based EuroCanadian offerings that dominate most of today’s academic industrial complex.

BEST PRACTICES

Kamloops/Thompson, BC – School District No. 73

SCHOOL BOARDS & RESOURCES

- Exemplary Aboriginal leadership and support is necessary for achieving stakeholders’ goals regarding the improvement of FNIM students’ academic outcomes.
- Stakeholders must keep their eyes on the future, and grasp the challenges that lie ahead, and move forward. Renewing *Enhancement Agreements* renews commitment to the goal of constantly improving Aboriginal students’ graduation rates.
- *Enhancement Agreements* involve extensive community consultation to come to agreement about the processes needed to share responsibility among the schools, teachers, parents and communities to support and improve the academic and personal success for all Aboriginal learners in the SD.
- Vote in politicians who have the authority and political will to make changes to SDs and the allocation of adequate funding to Aboriginal students.
- Support leadership that advocates for educational enhancement for FNIM students.

STUDENTS & BELONGING

- All people participate in things that they feel they belong to—Aboriginal parents and students are no different. Increasing the sense of belonging within the school systems in positive and meaningful ways will improve the level and content of activities among parents and students.
- Improving the living conditions of Aboriginal people will result in their positive potential to increase their children’s academic outcomes.
- Setting goals to support Aboriginal learners and to believe that they can achieve excellent results within the school system are a part of a strong foundation of building successes within Aboriginal student bodies.



COMMUNITIES & FAMILIES

- A strong working partnership between the major stakeholders (such as, in this case study, the School District, the First Nations Education Council [FNEC] and the Aboriginal community, parents/guardians) allows collaborative processes to work towards the most effective practices for improving student learning.
- Chiefs and Councils and all school authorities should cooperate in assisting Native learners to bridge the two cultures (Native and Canadian) by:
 - improving home/school liaisons with a particular emphasis on early schooling
 - using formally-developed curriculum, to orient all children to the history, culture, status and contributions of the First Peoples
 - making inflexible graded school systems less onerous for FNIM children and allowing incremental learning (most doable in early grades)
 - assisting FNIM students in preserving and promoting their heritage and languages, including their historical narrations in classroom experiences
 - eliminating all evidence of racial bias on school transportation and premises, and explaining these reasons to students
 - enlisting the volunteer support of competent FNIM adults as role models for all children
 - encouraging teachers to improve their knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal cultures, heritage and traditions through individual initiative and organizational school support, and
 - continuing counsel and advice to Native students to prepare them for living and working in Canadian society.
- Within each reserve, educational enhancement activities should be initiated by First Nations bands and councils. In urban and rural areas, school authorities and government agencies can communicate their intentions to improve educational outcomes for pre- and all public school for Aboriginal children.
- Encouraging FNIM adults to pursue advanced levels of basic education will enhance their own skills at keeping their children in school.
- *Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements* have increased parents'/guardians' involvement in student learning.
- Increase Aboriginal voices as community representatives in planning and delivering school programs. As well, in areas such as the accreditation process and education-related advisory committees.

CULTURE

- It is important to see that FNIM traditions and language continue to be considered a vital part of all young peoples' education. Implement initiatives that bring Elders into the classroom for student-oriented events and particularly for language instruction. The presence of Elders' is a visible confirmation of steps taken to ensure that heritage and culture are taking their rightful places within school experiences.

BEST PRACTICES

Greater Saskatoon, SK – Catholic School Division

SCHOOL BOARDS & RESOURCES

- Using as much of the pre-existing human and other resources from the Native Survival School, Oskayak became the “shining star” of the province in terms of graduating Aboriginal youth who previously had no hope of finishing their public schooling.



- Oskayak operated by funding received from the Education ministry, governance from the Parent Council, and educational programming and delivery by the school itself.
- Hire outside professionals, as needed, to help “clean house” regarding indifference and apathetic attitudes that instill and expect inferior standards from students and staff.
- As school planners and practitioners, remember that students and parents still bear the burden of the residential school experiences, and must rebuild capacity and autonomy.
- Oskayak administrators are seeking to create a network of schools, with like missions and visions – anywhere in the country – even in Ottawa, Ontario.

STUDENTS & BELONGING

- Be aware of, and evaluate graduation rates and other markers of student success on a regular basis. Look for mediocrity and do not let years and years pass without dealing with it.
- Operate the school in ways that meet students’ basic livelihood needs. They cannot be expected to excel academically if they are hungry, need a place to live or cannot afford to buy books and pencils.
- No student should have to give up his/her identity and ways of seeing the world in order to succeed in public school.
- Ask students every year, in a forum, what they want from their school, their expectations and how the school can make improvements.
- Hire personnel who are not “deficit-thinking” – that Aboriginal people cannot achieve what white students can achieve. Believe that Aboriginal students can be successful and have strong careers as lawyers and doctors and whatever else they may desire for employment and self-sustenance.
- Celebrate student success! The school needs to tell its story better, such as on its website so the public can rally around and support the school.
- Change expectations to reflect students’ visions of themselves as they would really like to be.
- Don’t encumber students by policies and other structures within the school – give license to those activities that work for the students.
- Allow students the freedom and flexibility to learn in ways they enjoy learning. Laughing does not exclude learning.

COMMUNITIES & FAMILIES

- Instead of fuliginous plans relating to schooling, community leaders and parents need a clear strong vision of what they want. A school can be an accomplishment, the realization of dreams and desires harbored by those involved in the long process of establishing an education system that works for FNIM students.
- Local control and a strong sense of community/parental responsibility are basic principles for Aboriginal youths’ success in school.
- Seek community partners to help with students’ social issues. These may be for counselling services, probation or other justice-related burdens, personal relationship problems, child minding, food-banks and so on.
- Encourage students to keep in touch with their home communities. For example, bring an Elder they may be especially close to for speaking to the class. Also, be watchful for events on their reserves that all students can attend.
- Parent communities underpin students’ educational success. They must be actively involved in decision-making and other activities needed for establishing the types of programs they want for their children.



- Parents are visionary, and their visions must be taken seriously by partners and community agencies also involved in education. Parents are a major part of community voices.
- When schools and school programs start working effectively and have been working for some years, do not become over-confident that this is now how “it will be”. Graduating students is constant hard work, and involves very active participation, care and dedication, not only by the students themselves, but by parents and the community.
- Remember there are different ways of reaching parents. Over the decades, these ways may change; be sure to account for regional and political differences in the methods of parent recruitment and retention.

CULTURE

- Curricula in public schools should recognize Aboriginal cultures, values, customs, languages and the contributions FNIM made, and are still making, to Canada. Such instruction promotes pride in the children, and respect for themselves as a group and as individuals.

BEST PRACTICES

Winnipeg, MB – Winnipeg School Division, Children of the Earth High School

SCHOOL BOARDS & RESOURCES

- Do not rule out broad innovative concepts that may appear large and lofty and too idealistic to become a reality. These dreams may come into fruition, especially with strong drive and ensuring that the purposes and goals are common to those involved.
- Native people have long advocated for their own education systems that would fit their children into successful non-Native society without compromise to their own societies. School boards need to respond in genuine ways – not, for example, to just “get tough” and discipline truant and other non-complying Native students.
- Schools must give equity to Aboriginal students so they can access educational experiences that are relevant to the learning needs.
- Academic achievement and success is vitally important for Aboriginal students, but should not entirely replace cultural teaching. Find a balance where students can achieve both. Hire special staff person(s) who are knowledgeable and can help both students and school staff with this.
- Strong representation in strategic places – such as Aboriginal trustees on school boards – furthers Aboriginal-inspired dreams of educational change.
- Remain as apolitical as possible, and do not “pit one side against” the other in hopes of achieving desired results.

STUDENTS & BELONGING

- Welcoming non-Aboriginal students in an Aboriginal school is inclusive but these students must be informed about the different reality they will encounter. This way, they can still be successful as students and not have to work at overcoming “culture shock”.
- Aboriginal students in Aboriginal schools can enjoy learning more if they are not dealing with racism and the cultural biases of the dominant societies.
- Aboriginal staff and students in high schools increase the sense of belonging for Aboriginal students.
- Aboriginal students must be given formal instruction on how to live in 2 worlds – their own and that of dominant society. They must learn how to negotiate successfully within their own FNIM cultures and also within those of settler societies.



COMMUNITIES & FAMILIES

- Consult with Aboriginal organizations and parents to solve Aboriginal education problems – parents know what their children’s school problems are, and they definitely have workable ideas that must be considered in implementing strategies for student success.
- FNIM parents and organizations should keep be persistent in articulating their concepts about what they want from an educational system.

CULTURE

- Procure the services of imaginative, creative teachers to integrate cultural teachings into core curriculum. Or, hire a curriculum specialist for this.
- Encourage staff and teachers to submit ideas on how to integrate Aboriginal-specific activities in the classroom. Vet these out through on-staff Cultural Advisors.
- Taking the students out on Cultural Days is vitally important. It gets them out of the classroom (which can sometimes get tiresome) and out into the natural world, or another world that still expands their educational experiences and opens their eyes and minds to different lifestyles and ways-of-doing while stimulating their natural curiosity.
- Aboriginal identities must be taught to Aboriginal students. Also, their histories, traditions, values and belief systems, cosmologies, worldviews and spiritualities because these facets make up a strong identity.
- Education for Aboriginal students must include the necessary tools to enhance the renaissance of Aboriginal philosophies and thought.
- The school environment was made to fulfill students’ desire to belong and to be a part of something. The school accepts and embraces their cultural background and heritage as a vital to the school’s *raison d’être*.

BEST PRACTICES

Winnipeg, MB – Winnipeg School Division,
Niji Mahka Elementary School

SCHOOL BOARDS & RESOURCES

- All projects, including starting up a school, require a compelling vision that guides stakeholders through startup phases and beyond. A clear vision helps determine decision-making and the implementation of short-and long-term goals.
- Work at making school a location where all aspects of students’ realities, culture and heritage are expressed. Find out to what FNIM students’ relate and how can these be spatially expressed.
- **Being a strong leader takes a lot of energy and creativity; a strong sense of responsibility is essential for a successful school start-up and follow-through. Leaders continue to propel the processes needed to bring schools into fruition.**
- The characteristics of effective leaders in good schools:
 - articulate a clear school mission
 - are a visible presence in classrooms and hallways
 - have high expectations of teachers and students
 - spend a major portion of the day working with teachers to improve instruction
 - are actively involved in diagnosing instructional problems, and
 - create a positive school climate.



STUDENTS & BELONGING

- Recognize all students as unique individuals and that their personal growth is very important.
- Each child should be assessed according to her/his unique learning style; ensure the school has ways to determine what these are. Parents should be knowledgeable about what these assessment procedures are, and how the school uses the results.
- All positive efforts the child exhibits should be valued.
- Assessment should be continuous and cumulative for each child, particularly as they progress through the grades.

COMMUNITIES & FAMILIES

- Parents are a valued part of the process and need to be included and the school's activities should reflect this.
- Consultation with parents and others interested in developing an Aboriginal school means to envision it, and this is a process in itself. Envision the school that is wanted, and be clear about the main conceptual framework.

CULTURE

- Limit EuroCanadian frames of reference since this what Aboriginal students have encountered all their lives and their usefulness has proven to be non-existent or, at best, ambiguous.
- **An educational system should affirm students' cultural and intellectual identities and accommodate their ways-of-learning. School then becomes a place for achieving academic success, and also a place they enjoy attending.**
- Urban FNIM children and youth may have limited exposure and knowledge of their people's cultural traditions. To foster a respectful environment that teaches them these things, consider using as many different ways to teach them as possible – these include: visiting Elders/ artists/singers, field trips to cultural events (sweat lodge ceremonies, feasts, language classes, Indigenous art shows) to help strengthen their self-identity in a positive way.
- The integration of cultural and traditional teachings in a supportive learning environment provides Aboriginal students with strengths and skills to meet life's challenges.
- Holistic teachings enhance Aboriginal children's academic achievement and provide a framework or structure for educational experiences.





Review of Findings and Analysis of Selected Literature

Review of Findings and Analysis of Selected Literature

Topic: Establish and increase school board commitment

Section 93 of the *Constitution Act*, 1982 lays the foundation for the current Canadian education system. The Act essentially grants exclusive responsibility for education to the provinces: “in and for each province, the Legislature may exclusively make laws in relation to education”. School districts were developed for governance by locally elected boards of trustees and are a key characteristic of Canadian public schooling (Bredeson & Kose, 2005; Wallner, 2012). They are the predominant local education governance authority (Gaskell & Levin, 2012) and as such, are responsible for the overall direction for the school systems. In Ontario, they provide “education programs that meet the needs of the school community” (Ontario Ministry of Education, School Boards, p. 1).

School boards, as governance structures, are essential for successful student outcomes (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier & Pearce, 2011; Johnson, 2012). They “can overcome many of the historical and socio-economic factors that negatively affect Aboriginal student performance. Good governance practices can both ‘raise the student achievement bar’ and ‘close the student achievement gap’” (Schmold, 2011, p. 17). Indeed, engaging the community is a Best Practice (Delagardelle, 2008; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) since parents need to be active in supportive and informative collaborations with schools, school board staff and educational professionals to maximize their children’s learning opportunities and outcomes (Second Annual Report, Vancouver Board of Education, 2010).

As a member of the Aboriginal Education Committee of the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition, it is crucial for Wabano to continue seeking and facilitating strong collaborative efforts with district school boards so high-quality education can be actualized by FNIM students. That stated, the onus is on district school boards to take the leadership and initiative to reach out to the FNIM communities to help define student problems within the public school systems and, further, to derive collaboratively the solutions relative to these concerns. It is the school boards’ responsibility to pursue and diligently develop with the Aboriginal communities and organizations the strategies for co-operative efforts that improve educational opportunities and results in the public schools. Considering the history of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal relations in this country, it is imperative that the school boards recognize their culpability in this area, and proactively reach out to consult, communicate and take the advice of those working to achieve Aboriginal student successes. Implementing an active and involved Aboriginal Advisory Committee would be expedient as a starting point in this regard.

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Establishing and Increasing School Board Commitment)

Address, at the school board level, the link between Aboriginal status and poor school achievement. Consider why, for example, worse outcomes in education persist for Aboriginal youth even when research studies factor in prior achievement and other related factors. Become aware, also, of the realities of racism and discrimination to the extent that the Supreme Court of Canada (2005)



stated that, “The courts have acknowledged that racial prejudice against visible minorities is so notorious and indisputable that its existence will be admitted without any need of evidence . . . (R. vs. Spence). Regarding “colour blind” ideologies⁵ in teaching, these are meant to deal with teachers’ discomfort in acknowledging students’ racial differences and posits the notion that noticing race is wrong because everyone is equal. “Colour blindness” in teaching contexts, however, masks “a dysconscious racism, ‘an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given’ (King in Smith-Maddox and Solo’ranzo, 2002, p. 67)” (van Ingen & Halas, 2006, p. 389). Aboriginal youth must think of themselves in terms of their race or ethnicity because the rest of the world views them that way; the days of allowing teachers to deny uncomfortable cultural differences should be long over (Armstrong & Wildman, 2008).

School boards should consider how to implement principles of Aboriginal parental involvement since it strongly supports the academic, social and behavioural growth of students (Barnes, Josefowitz & Cole, 2006; Esler, Godber & Christenson, 2002; Fredua-Kwarteng, 2008). A few perspectives in this direction are:

- providing a meeting site for activities that encourage Aboriginal parents to view themselves as partners in their children’s educational processes, such a “lodge” within the school that need be no more than a large room where parents can bring physical reminders of their culture and traditions; take Aboriginal diversity into account as various groups will respond in various ways
- teaching teachers to encourage parent involvement – teach them what facilitates participation, and what does not; sometimes what works in one area does not work in another, and new teachers must not learn this by “trial and error” – the risk of alienating the Aboriginal community is too high
- encouraging staff and educators to ask parents how they see themselves as involved in their children’s schooling; be aware of diversity in responses since most communities are non-homogenous in terms of the First Nations, Inuit and Métis
- informing school staff to be aware that parents become involved over time, not instantly—realizing that school for especially the older generations of parents has probably been a negative experience
- being clear about involvement and what it specifically means and what it looks like; policies/strategies should be developed collaboratively with parents – noting that parents will respond with their own needs, interests and strengths
- providing schools with sufficient financial, human and other resources to develop and maintain active Aboriginal parent involvement

One US educator, Dr. Paul Johnson (2010) articulated twelve vital characteristics of school board governance that are directly linked to higher levels of student success (pp. 90-91). Dr. Johnson did not identify these in an Aboriginal context, nor a Canadian one. These characteristics are nonetheless very useful and listed herein (left-hand column). Corresponding Aboriginal contexts (right-hand column) are also listed – these are ones the authors of this Report repeatedly heard from those they interviewed:

⁵ Colour blindness is a racial ideology that proposes the best way to end discrimination is by treating students as equally as possible, without regard to race, culture, or ethnicity. These approaches are revealed when teachers reveal thoughts such as, “I’m not prejudiced. I don’t notice any differences in my students. I treat them all the same.”

	Dr. Johnson's key principles	Best Practice in Aboriginal contexts
1	create a vision	Pursuits towards the identified outcome of graduating more FNIM students must be guided by a clear unambiguous long-term vision that is shared by school boards, schools and district/regional stakeholders, particularly Aboriginal communities. Avoid "piece-meal" type of thinking when creating a vision because the results are limited and short-term; all envisioned activities must belong to an over-arching framework- an example of this is hiring one or two Aboriginal staff for one or two schools and expecting them to improve Aboriginal student outcomes, whereas the entire school district must be drawn in, and committed.
2	use data	Important data are the ones derived from mainly self-identification policies; ensure that all calls for data are Aboriginal-friendly and respectful, and that what are being requested are the ones needed. Derive all data in the same accommodating way.
3	set goals	Goals should be established with parental input; find out what Aboriginal parents want for their children, and how they want to derive it. If there are no goals, no one will understand where he/she and the whole system is going.
4	monitor progress and taking corrective action	Discover what FNIM parents and students mean by "progress", and be open to their solutions. This means communicating in meaningful ways that facilitate openness and forthrightness. Correct past methods that may not have worked well with Aboriginal parents/guardians.
5	create awareness and urgency	The lack of achievement by Aboriginal students is urgent; study the space between your vision and what the data is saying. Leadership, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, should inspire and engage the community to create awareness and appropriate plans of action.
6	engage the community	Discover novel, creative and respectful ways of discoursing with the Aboriginal community. Encourage feedback and become aware of the communication means that continually improves your communication <i>modus operandi</i> .
7	connect with district leadership	Invite local leadership to the schools' events that are a "good fit" in promoting children's education. Find constructive ways of involving leadership's authority and presence to advocate for parents and students. Get to know local Aboriginal leadership and their systems of governance. For example, rather than working directly with Chiefs and Councils, it may more expedient to work through the education policy officials within the political organizations to which Chiefs and Councils belong. This has been found to reach community members and parents on a more personal scale (Carr-Stewart, 2006).
8	create climate	Identify the characteristics of an Aboriginal-friendly school environment and work towards achieving that climate.



	Dr. Johnson's key principles	Best Practice in Aboriginal contexts
9	provide staff development	Staff development must include cultural awareness, not just how to become tolerant of outside cultures. Teach about fostering positive feelings toward Aboriginal people (affection); feeling comfortable and at ease with Aboriginal people (comfort); believing there is a close connection with Aboriginal people (kinship); seeking interactions with Aboriginal people (engagement); and, feeling impressed and inspired by Aboriginal people (enthusiasm) – all in the context of the school and the classroom. Remember these things do not just come naturally to teachers and staff – like every group encountering new concepts, they have to be taught.
10	develop policy with a focus on student learning	Policies must be developed that encourage all the facets that further Aboriginal student success. Itemize these facets and, with FNIM parents/guardians/students, develop these policies while still realizing the absolute limitations of the school.
11	demonstrate commitment	One of the most effective ways to demonstrate commitment to FNIM success is to ensure that financial and other resources are available to support the vision, goals, staff development, policies and advocacy efforts of the school.
12	practice unified governance	Educate staff and teachers about the importance of being unified in achieving the desired outcomes for Aboriginal students.

Topic: Creating outreach, self-identification and linkages among FNIM students and families

1. Outreach and linkages among FNIM students and families

A significant body of research has stressed the importance of creating outreach and linkages between schools school boards/districts and the FNIM community (Burns, 2001; Donovan, 2011; Harris, 2008) since strong parental involvement is a significant factor for student success (Hutchinson, Mushquash & Donaldson, 2008). Henderson and Mapp stated that, "Effective programs to engage families and communities embrace a philosophy of partnership. The responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff, and community members" (2004, p. 51). School board directors and principals are in a unique position to welcome all parents and students into schools, not just those who defer to them, accept their opinions or conform to their educational philosophies. It is incumbent on those in school leadership to hear the messages of all parents regarding their children's education and deal with feedback in ways other than relegating them as "unacceptable", "impossible" or "destructive".

Outreach, too can help publicize policy developments that directly affect the FNIM communities. Taking place at various government levels, these policy initiatives should have the active participation and input from Aboriginal families and leaders before they become entrenched. For example, the fact of Ontario having added funding over the past few years for Aboriginal education to its transfer grants to school boards (Paquette & Fallon, 2010) makes it imperative for Aboriginal parents to ensure that fiscal transfers are spent in tangible ways that reflect their children's

increased academic achievement. On the federal level, the Aboriginal and Northern Development Canada (AANDC) is proposing a First Nations Education Act that would “provide a framework for achieving better outcomes for students through reform by: creating standards and structures; strengthening governance and accountability; and providing mechanisms for stable, predictable and sustainable funding” (AANDC, 2013). Although this department has embarked on an on-line consultation, there is question as to how many reserve communities are aware of it.



Protocol with schools and school boards should articulate the need for keeping the FNIM community abreast of educational policy developments, particularly those which impact their children and whether they are on reserve or not.

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Outreach and Creating Linkages)

- School boards and schools should be active in promoting outreach and linkages to the Aboriginal community.
- To facilitate smooth functional linkages between FNIM organizations and school boards and schools, Memoranda of Understanding or protocols should be collaboratively conceptualized, then implemented. Other guidelines are:
 - School leaders such as principals are positioned to offer FNIM parents the information and data needed to become dynamic partners in achieving desired educational outcomes.
 - Collaboratively, FNIM parents and school boards should form vision statements, mandates and objectives for their collective goal of successful student achievement.
 - Activities must directly align with specific student-related goals, such as information sessions to establish respectful self-identification policies.
- One of the main duties of an involved Aboriginal Advisory Committee (when it is established) is to inform FNIM parents of educational policy developments that come from all levels of government. Particularly those directly affecting Aboriginal education should be emphasized. Information sessions should include the policy's short- and long-term implications. Decision-making regarding proposed policy should also be facilitated so parents can weigh their options. Many FNIM parents do not understand the intricacies of the Euro-Canadian educational policy development system and how these policies are implemented (Abele, Dittburner & Graham, 2001).
- Sound linkages between FMNI parents and school boards ensure continuous communication between the two groups. Communication may be about curriculum, instruction, policy development, and any topic that either Aboriginal parents or the school boards/schools wish to discuss.

Self-identification

According to one provincial ministry, the impetus for voluntary, confidential self-identification is to collect accurate and reliable data for assessing the progress of Aboriginal student achievement. School boards are encouraged to develop policies towards this purpose, and the Ministry is “committed to working with school boards and supporting them in developing such policies, in partnership with local First Nation, Métis, and Inuit parents, families, and communities” (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 7).



The following is an example from Alberta⁶ and demonstrates some weaknesses of Aboriginal self-identification policies that have been formulated by school board(s):

Overview for parents/guardians

Each year, parents/guardians can choose to self-identify their child as First Nations, Métis or Inuit (FNMI) during the registration process in Edmonton Public Schools. Should a parent/guardian declare this information, additional funding from the Government of Alberta will be provided to the District. This funding is used to provide programs and services to support the education of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. The process is voluntary, confidential and allocation of funds is targeted to support and enhance the educational experience of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students.

Observations

- The agent providing programs and services to support Aboriginal children's education in this example is the Government of Alberta. From the lived realities of Aboriginal peoples, "the government" is an entity which is not friendly, nor inclusive towards, FNIM parents/guardians and students. This fact is relevant in formulating self-identification policies.
- The "confidentiality" of the process and derived data referred to in last sentence is questionable. By simply declaring this information to be "confidential", does it indeed make it so? The strength and validity of privacy statements must provide insights and knowledge of Aboriginal people, and carry realistic, not perfunctory, emphasis that confidentiality is honoured according to law.
- The link between FNIM students and the support and enhancement in their schooling is apparently not evident to those students. The dismal rate of their achievement in comparison with other groups is proof of that, and all too evident to FNIM parents/guardians, as well. These statements, then, do not relate to the life experiences of FNIM parents/guardians in terms of the effectiveness of the District's services and programs from the extra money it receives from the Government of Alberta. "The District" is therefore perceived as just another unfriendly, non-inclusive body which interferes with Aboriginal student success, in spite of claims such as these.

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Self-identification)

Community knows best. School boards must be inclusive of Aboriginal communities' values when deriving and articulating self-identification policies.

Consider context. Remember that Aboriginal peoples' traumatic history of colonization and the unrelenting assimilationist policies of residential schools have made self-identification an especially complex matter (Hallett, Want, Chandler, Koopman, Flores & Cehrke, 2007; Wilson & Cardwell, 2012).

- Language and the tone of written language should acknowledge this traumatic past and reflect an empowering of FNIM parents/guardians.
- To facilitate inclusivity, Native languages should be used as much as possible. Also, the processes of self-identification policy-making should be explained by Native personnel as a means of supporting FNIM parents/guardians and encouraging them to express their ideas about these policies and procedures (Annis & Corenbloom, 2001).

6 See <http://aboriginaleducation.epsb.ca/documents/selfidentify.pdf>



Learn from others. Seek out more appropriate ways to encourage Aboriginal parents/guardians to self-identify. Consider these, for example:

- Limestone School Board's "Aboriginal Self-Identification Policy: Student Version" at www.limestone.on.ca/Students/Aboriginal_Students/. These FAQ are written from Aboriginal students' perspective and asks questions that intelligent, curious students are likely to ask. Please note, however, the possessive term "our Aboriginal students" is inappropriate and pejorative.
- Hold open dialogue sessions for FNIM parents/guardians on self-identification and publicize these sessions widely and know how to reach Aboriginal parents/guardians. Aboriginal people can "MC" or facilitate these sessions, for example. Self-identification policies are all about informed consent that is an educational matter in itself (McGrath & Phillips, 2008; Ward, 2011).
- See Halton District School Board's strategy on open dialogues at: www.hdsb.ca/Newsroom/Pages/Community-to-Provide-Input-on-Aboriginal-Self-Identification-Policies.aspx

Pedagogy can change. School board directors, educators, principals and teachers must recognize and be thoroughly knowledgeable about "how pedagogical practice needs to address the particular educational needs and learning preferences of Aboriginal students" (Cherubini, 2010, p.15). The implementation of this knowledge will replace impressions of "The District" or other similarly ambiguous bodies being experts on educational offerings to Aboriginal students, and how they are delivered.

Data matters. Remember the importance of deriving accurate data: "... getting good data and keeping track of our progress is the only way to ensure that educational progress for Canada's Aboriginal peoples is really being achieved. The cost, while doubtless significant, will be small relative to the costs and the implications for the future of this country of allowing the education system to continue failing Aboriginal people" (Mendelson, 2006, p.36).

Topic: Meet urgent needs of FNIM students

Based on literature review findings and feedback from case study informants, the authors of this Report have taken the liberty to articulate five urgent needs of FNIM students, since Wabano did not specifically identify them. In no particular order, these are: basic livelihood needs, negotiating pedagogies, racism as it affects Aboriginal students, strong identities and learning gender.

1. Basic livelihood needs

According to the *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, "... the legacy of colonialism left Aboriginal peoples disproportionately ranked among the poorest of Canadians ..." (Wilson & MacDonald, 2010, p. 3). Without question Aboriginal students come from marginalized groups and are subject to low social capital (Lahn, 2012); the first step in furthering chronically disadvantaged students is ensuring that their basic livelihood needs are being met (Bray, 2005). While on-reserve schools experience disparities such as shortage of material/equipment or inadequate curriculum, many off-reserve students suffer from a lack of food, shelter and clothing.





The children of low-income Aboriginal families are at increased risk of academic failure because their homes and reserve communities most often lack the resources to prepare them academically

(Cottrell, Preston & Pearce, 2012; Brown & Fraehlich, 2012).

They also tend to experience more health concerns due to poor nutrition and insufficient daily intakes of high-quality calories (Best Start Resource Centre, 2010). Families living below the poverty level are more likely to have children with learning disabilities and developmental delays than those with more disposable income (Spence & White, 2009).

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Meeting Students' Basic Livelihood Needs)

- School boards can prioritize their needs and find the necessary funding for breakfast and lunch programs.
- Students may lack very basic school equipment such as pens, pencils, binders and paper. They may not have computer access or a quiet place at home to study. Schools should be conscious of students' quality-of-life and implement policies that ensure physical needs such as these are available within the school setting in off-class hours.

2. Negotiating pedagogies

As part of their education, Aboriginal students must teach themselves (and each other) how to negotiate success within two pedagogies: their own, and that of the dominant society (Kerwin, 2011). For example, Professor Stonebanks (2008, p. 14) observed:

... my students, Cree students who are registered in McGill's teacher training program, who when asked the question, "Who discovered North America?" answered "Christopher Columbus". When pressed with the same question again, they repeated Columbus, and then changed their answer to Cartier, *trying to give it a more Canadian feeling*. Finally, one student said, "Oh, you want the real answer." It was a strong indication of how they felt that *their "real answers" were not acceptable in the school setting, even in higher learning. (emphasis mine)*

This passage indicates that Aboriginal students know, often through painful classroom "trial-and-error" experiences, the academic nuances to which they must comply. They may know what is deemed academically correct and factual and also realize its difference from what they know as truth. They also live with the pressure of having to prove they at least empathize with the serial collective called "Canadians" when their life experiences have shown that Canada does not value them as the First Peoples. By virtue of only their identity, they become unwittingly enmeshed in mental and intellectual contortions because, as recipients of colonialism, they have learned to be dismissed, not only at a singular, but also at group and generational levels. An outcome of this type of empirical knowledge, both formal and informal, creates linkages within the entire People to a vast burning rage at the oppressions into which they have been submerged. Their realities are towering grief and loss for a heritage and traditions of another distant life that had always provided refuge, structure, knowledge and reality. Now they can only view that legacy they were to have inherited, had it not been for the onslaught of colonialism, through a dark glass, and never come to live it out.



Aboriginal students are given no formal instruction on how to deal with long-term suppression, with its corresponding dichotomies and ambiguities (Harrison, 2007) and are left to cope on their own. Indeed, the EuroCanadian method of addressing Native ontologies and epistemologies has been to relegate them as primitive curiosities and irrelevant in a “modern world” (British Columbia Teachers Federation, 2002; Howe & Lisi, 2013), which is condescending and ill-conceived, but convenient for educators.



For true knowledge production and reconciliation, school curricula must include an acknowledgment not only of colonial history, but also its present-day impacts on Aboriginal students.

Curriculum developers must recognize that “knowledge is socially constructed by and in the interest of the dominant in society” (Farganis, 2004, p. 192) and deal with Aboriginal peoples’ inheritances by constructing counter-hegemonic, fluid and transformative curricula that empower and recognize FNIM students. Friere (1990, p. 175) stated that, “What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves”. While non-Aboriginal educational practitioners may fear a takeover of their elevated positions (Fanon, 1963) Aboriginal people have always wanted their children educated and well-prepared economically for the present and the future (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996; Saunders & Hill, 2007).

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Negotiating Pedagogies)

Aboriginal teachers have a key role. Aboriginal teachers must be taught about their own traditional education systems as well as those of EuroCanadian origin. They must be shown how to veer away from subconsciously perpetuating Western ideologies at the expense of Indigenous thought. The final outcome should be children who know how to sustain and thrive in the dominant society while still identifying with, appreciating and valuing their own (Wootton & Stonebanks, 2010).

Culture has outcomes. One researcher meticulously studied the outcomes of integrating the local Aboriginal culture and language into a school’s core learning areas (literacy, mathematics, science) and concluded that the influences of culturally-relevant curriculum and corresponding teaching practices substantially elevate Aboriginal students’ learning achievements (Lipka, 2002).

“... Aboriginal early childhood programs should incorporate Aboriginal pedagogy, be infused with Aboriginal language and culture, be adequately staffed by qualified Aboriginal educators, be structured to empower Aboriginal communities...” (Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier & Pearce, 2011, p. 11).

- Curriculum developers should design culturally appropriate programs for Aboriginal children/youth. The effectiveness of these programs should be evaluated in ways that complement students’ ways-of-knowing (Rasmussen, Baydala & Sherman, 2004).

Embrace new ways. Instead of didactic teaching (such as the “sage on the stage” teaching style), teachers should become familiar with more exploratory and self-directed ways to reach students in their life contexts. Teachers can act more like guides, mediators, mentors, consultants, and



advocates for their students, and help them connect their culturally- and community-based knowledge to classroom learning (MacLean & Wason-Ellam, 2006).

Understand the impact of how we remember history. All teachers of Aboriginal students must be trained to explain oppression and colonialism in ways that encourage, rather than discourage, students. They must, at least, know how to promote students' futures insofar as academic achievement is identified as a location of progress and self-confidence.

Connect. Social networking and participation can be fostered among Aboriginal communities by school boards promoting Aboriginal cultures, histories and traditions within the schools (Laughlin & Leman, 2010). Schools can be welcoming and provide special days for events that highlight Aboriginal peoples, and invite community leaders.

3. Racism as it affects Aboriginal students

Canada's long-standing racializing practices situate Aboriginal people who make up about 4% of the population (Government of Canada, 2012) as "other" relative to the dominant EuroCanadian society (Rhee & Subreenduth, 2006; Schick and St. Denis, 2005). The most salient example of this is the federal *Indian Act* (1869) which founded the legal roots of racism in Canada; this legislation established the reserve system and set the example for the apartheid regime in South Africa (Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003; Sayers, MacDonald, Fiske, Newell, George & Cornet, 2001). Racism has become institutionalized in education, evident in the poorer educational systems on reserves and in schools – sites in which Aboriginal students have inherited a colonial legacy of active racism (Mills & Clarke, 2009).

While **many public schools and school districts recognize the failure of the education system regarding Aboriginal academic achievement** (Mendelson, 2006), **little overall has been established to improve these outcomes**, many of which are the result of racism (British Columbia Department of Education, 2001; Silver & Mallett, 2002). The latter authors report that, "The incidence of overt forms of racism—name calling and stereotyping, for example—is high. Institutional forms of racism are common" (p. 6). Elevated high-school dropout rates are among the outcomes of racism against Aboriginal people (Huff, 2000). Deyhle (1998) observes that racism impedes Aboriginal students' educational and economic opportunities and that "racism is a reality they live with daily, to ignore this is to place responsibility on the individual for identity problems of low self-worth, alienation, and helplessness" (p. 4).

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Dealing with Racism Towards Aboriginal Students)

Choose to see. As institutions, school boards and schools must examine their environments for racism, accept responsibility and work towards eradicating it. Some areas of teaching and school life to consider are:

- discrimination in historical and contemporary representations
- omissions and inaccuracies about, and discrediting Aboriginal history and perspectives
- reinforcing stereotypes about Aboriginal people, even though this may be unintentional
- using clichés that denigrate the FMNI people (clothing styles, food, physical appearance) and jokes directed against Native people and/or at their expense



- insulting language, making fun about Aboriginal peoples' accents and ways of self-expression
- graffiti that reflects racist thought

Empower yourself. Instead of blaming students, parents and Aboriginal communities and relying on disciplinary measures and superficial solutions, teachers and school staff should be asking themselves, "What can I do to ensure the success of Aboriginal students in my classroom? Where do I see racism and how can I root it out?" Racism is counter-educational and always results in conflict (Raby, 2004).

Knowledge is power. School districts and schools should make anti-racism teaching mandatory for all teachers and staff. These must include topics such as: defining, recognizing and identifying racism (answers the questions, "What is racism? What are its dynamics?"); dealing constructively with racism; teaching students about racism (Bedard, 2000); the result of perceiving institutional racism as individual racism; and, understanding the reasons for racism (eg., to achieve or maintain power and dominance).

Move through discomfort. School districts and schools should address racism even though it is an uncomfortable topic. One woman described this attitude of unease in these words: "Racism, the word nobody likes . . . Racism is a slippery subject, one which evades confrontation, yet one which overshadows every aspect of our lives." (Anzaldúa, 1990, p. xix)

Start from the top. A school board should be, in its vision and practices, an anti-racist institution with leadership prepared to institute policies that some staff may not initially support. They must be able to reconcile differences so anti-racism policies can be implemented, at least in the schools they represent. Anti-racism policy documents should not simply sit in the front office or library somewhere for staff to ignore conveniently. All school staff must be oriented proactively in dealing with racism (Aveling, 2007).

Create a safe space. Aboriginal students must be encouraged and taught how to deal with racism in ways that are not a "crutch" and learn how to recognize the problems that are not caused by racism (Mentor, 2000). The school can be a location where Aboriginal parents and leaders learn about the manifestations of racism, constructively coping with racism, and solution-finding skills.

4. Strong identity

A strong identity is essential for Aboriginal students' success particularly because they are situated on the outskirts of prevailing Canadian society.

(Burke, 2007; Lee, 2009)

An example is from Nunavut where rapid changes have been devastating to all Inuit, especially since the mid- to late-1940s when the Cold War era began. During this period, American military presence and political influence combined with Canadian exploitation of natural resources in the Arctic and, to the detriment of the Inuit, led to their relocation into permanent settlements (Diubaldo, 1992). To this day, there are uniquely debilitating effects on boys and men that relate





to identity and gender roles from their older societies for while many Inuit girls' and women's roles have transferred comparatively readily into the newer Western ways, those of men have not. Many Inuit men continue to suffer from subsequent dislocation in the contemporary economic world, and the new images of men from a Western perspective have little to do with life in the far North as they experience it (Stairs, 1992). This means that reinforcement of self-confidence and self-worth for Inuit males is difficult, both individually and collectively. There is difficulty in being neither modern nor traditional (Légaré, 2002); a transitional image often emerges blurred and ambiguous (Dorais, 1997; Patrick, 2008).

Finding a right place that is congruous to the Inuit youths' sense of self may be extremely difficult, especially without guidance from school or strong role modeling. Looking at outside views of First Nations or Métis is not helpful to Inuit, either. This imagery tends to be critical and expressed without the understanding of Aboriginal cultural values and does not reflect the role that the foundation of colonialism is playing in the lives of these populations (Francis, 1992; Lischke & McNab, 2005). Such ethnocentric portrayals work at alienating youthful populations from society – whether it is Western or FNIM society. Alienation perpetuates struggles for a clear self-identity and eats away at the individual's sense of well-being within everyday social and familial contexts and relationships, including within Western education systems.

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Supporting a Strong Identity)

Relationship matters. Facilitate strong social relationships among students, and help them build an unshakable cultural identity – these enhance their well-being (Kulchyski, Angmarlik, McCaskill & Newhouse, 1999).

History matters. Programs are needed for students to enhance their historical grounding and involvement in traditional practices from trusted Elders, leaders or mentors, and courses that teach self-acceptance and self-awareness, and re-claiming cultural identity (Harthun, Dustman, Jumper Reeves, Hecht & Marsiglia, 2008). Discourse about Aboriginal histories and identities are often written in the past tense, as if Aboriginal nations no longer exist (*E.g.*, “The Mohawk were an Indigenous people who lived in Southern Ontario”). Also, anachronism is common and leads to erroneous conceptions that displace the First Peoples in historical contexts (*e.g.*, The book title *The Geography of Canada: 1750 – 1930* implies that Canada existed in 1750 whereas it did not). Such depictions of inaccurate historical narrations depreciate the cultural identities of the First Peoples and should be replaced with genuine texts of history and social relations.

Culture matters. Aboriginal and Western worldviews are distinct from one another; as such, the formation of positive identity in Aboriginal students should only begin according to their own cultural, linguistic, political and spiritual norms (Friedel, 2011; Alfred & Corntassel, 2005). Genuine cultural education is engaging and generates the resilience, survival and thriving of FNIM youth in holistic ways (Doucette, Ranson & Kowalewski, 2006).

5. Learning gender

The deterioration of healthy relationships between Aboriginal men and women (and boys and girls) is largely rooted in European-based gender values and placement under which Aboriginal

people live today (Carter, 2003). In older Aboriginal societies, men and women had different but complementary gender roles and responsibilities that were based on respect and honour (Agtuca, 2008; Altamirano-Jiménez, 2009); children and youth were educated to fulfill their places and responsibilities. Consequently, unlike the *status quo* among Aboriginal populations, social problems were held in check by specific protocol and ways-of-doing that left youth free to fulfill their human potentials. The study of how Western-based gender roles made inroads into Aboriginal cultural territory is important for youth to learn (Emberley, 1996).



Gender history can help Aboriginal youth recognize and unlearn harmful female-male stereotypes and help reverse the production of gender that makes male privilege and female submission appear natural, rather than it being deliberately produced and structured.

As well, it helps students understand the matriarchal systems by which many First Nations were governed

Anderson and Umberson (2001) observe that the accomplishment of gender is perpetuated by "... cultural beliefs about underlying and essential differences between women and men, and social structures that constitute and are constituted by these beliefs . . ." (p. 359). Stein (1999) emphasized the importance of teaching about gender violence in schools: "My research over the past two decades on peer-to-peer sexual harassment has confirmed that schools may well be the training grounds for domestic violence through the practice of and permission for sexual harassment" (p. 212). While such insights may be too intense for young children, they can still be involved in identifying gender prescriptions in media with which they are already familiar. Foundational curricula can be established in earlier schooling so they can sequentially develop and link to deeper gender awareness and understanding for later ages and grades (Grant & Sleeter, 2009). As well, the exploration of various specific Western-based expressions that ground the inferiority and subjugation of women in cultural norms can be informally queried at any time among students (Genz, 2007). The values, ideals and suggestive prods that emerge from popular gendered portrayals meant for children and youth should be seriously examined and questioned. Skilled instructors can help students' discourse to the realization that such idealized and patterned gender arrangements can readily enable bullying and violence.

Teaching gender discrimination that is relevant to Aboriginal communities is a study of the legal categorizations of an "Indian" as defined in the Indian Act. Creative and imaginative teachers can help youth, male and female, locate themselves within federal legislation, and develop curriculum that is interesting and personally involves students through a study of their placement in the Indian registry. From a broader perspective, such discussion can help students realize the violence of the Indian Act and also the resilience of the First Nations in withstanding the extermination efforts embedded therein. Specifically, Bill C-31 is a worthy area of study, particularly the history of its development by women who were actively opposed by governments and national Native organizations because of internalized sexist discrimination against them.



EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Learning Gender)

Look around your space. Maracle (2003) envisions the creation of “safe spaces for both genders to develop” (p. 77) and encourages educators to develop environments that foster open and respectful communication between males and females, places that are conducive for further understanding of gender and gender roles. It is essential to create cultures in schools and in colleges that are equally welcoming of all students, regardless of gender (Lodge, 2004).

Engage parents. Schools, communities and parental protocols must complement one another so that maximum effectiveness of anti-gender-bullying, -harassment and -violence policies is achieved. There is evidence that sexist behaviour and attitudes are so much a part of the ethos of some schools that they actually go unnoticed (Myer & Mikel Brown, 2009).

Learn the impact. Teachers themselves must understand why teaching gender roles and dynamics is important. One place to start is to consider that a factor that weighs against equality is the gendered character of the knowledge and discourses within education itself. It is also essential to create cultures in schools and in colleges that are equally welcoming of all students, regardless of gender (Lodge, 2004). A goal of gender instruction is to enable young Aboriginal people, both girls and boys, to think about their futures in a structured way and to examine critically their expectations and life plans, including educational and home-life endeavours.

Topic: Improve self-confidence and academic achievement of FNIM students

The educational history of Aboriginal people must be considered in schools because while today's FNIM students did not attend residential schools, many in their communities had, including their parents and grandparents. Residential schools were oppressive and “built on negative stereotypical mythic representations of Indians and Indian society and Eurocentric Glorification” (Battiste, 2004, p. 5) and as such, their intergenerational effects on the self-confidence and academic outcomes of the present Aboriginal student body are still reverberating (Elias, Mignone, Hall, Hong, Hart & Sareen, 2012; Smith, McAlister, Tedford Gold & Sullivan-Bentz, 2011). There are many other outcomes of colonization that comprise Aboriginal students' everyday realities and continually abrade their educational potential (Evans-Campbell, 2008; Warry, 2000). These must become visible, recognized and addressed by school boards and educational authorities to change the current trends and improve the graduation levels and successes of FNIM students (Barnes, Josefowitz & Cole, 2006; Hulan, 2012; Kershaw & Harkey, 2011).

Enjoying elementary and high-school experiences is important because it can lead students into a university education (Spence, White & Maxim, 2007); presently, many Aboriginal students find themselves with strong feelings of isolation and alienation in the high-schools they attend (Brownlee, Rawana, MacArthur & Probizanski, 2010; Lewthwaite, 2007). As well, Aboriginal children and youth who are already in school need their abilities and performance validated through educational successes – experiences that will heighten self-esteem and self-confidence (Aikenhead, 2001; Craven, Marsh & Burnett, 2003). They must also be taught to visualize the direct correlation between education and self-reliance (Brant Castellano, Davis & Lahache, 2000).





FNIM parents/guardians need to become active participants of school boards that initiate, encourage and perpetuate the educational achievement of all children and youth in the community

(Delgado Gaitan, 2004).

Finally, cultural inclusion in education must become a reality to enhance school attendance for Aboriginal children and youth (Jenlink & Jenlink, 2007).

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Improving Self-confidence and Academic Achievement)

See the whole picture. Acknowledge, respect, and validate the totality of the lives of Aboriginal students, including their histories, pre-Contact and EuroCanadian education, language, social values and identities, and how these yet impact their contemporary school lives and experiences (Young, 2005).

Value culture. Honour Aboriginal teachers' and students' cultural and language capacities; schools and school districts must recognize the role of language as a powerful transmitter of culture and therefore germane to cultural survival (Agbo, 2002, 2004; Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012). A recent study reveals that among Inuit children, "children who spoke an Aboriginal language and were helped by their schoolteachers were more likely to be doing well in school as compared to Inuit children who did not speak an Aboriginal language" (Guèvremont & Kohen, 2012, p. 24).

Provide support for the future. Help prepare FNIM students for the complexities of school life (such as, in larger urban centres, having to negotiate multiple non-Aboriginal identities, languages and cultures on a daily basis), and encourage post-secondary education; recognize that home landscapes are foreign compared to the everyday realities of elementary and secondary schools (Hardy Cox & Strange, 2010). Promote accessibility to post-secondary education and talk with Aboriginal students about what a university education is and the necessary steps to achieve one, and favourable career choices/employment.

Examine and make change. Schools must courageously evaluate their current systems and any areas that are hindering Aboriginal student success.

- Inventory the ways to encourage the safety and inclusion of Aboriginal students at all levels of their education (Stonechild, 2006; Toulouse, 2007).
- Introduce culturally relevant curriculum in as many course offerings as possible (Lipka, Sharp & Brenner, 2005).
- Increase the number of Aboriginal teachers and staff in all schools (urban, rural and on-reserve); Aboriginal students feel more "at home" and accepted in settings that are inclusive of Aboriginal people (Kanu, 2002).





Topic: Increase cultural understandings of all staff and students

Literature shows that, for FNIM students, educational resourcing must be culturally-grounded since Indigenous worldviews are holistic and spiritual (Battiste, 2000; Castagano & Brayboy, 2008; Pomeroy, 1992). Atwool (2006) makes this additional assertion about culture as protective, and furthering the successful education of Aboriginal students: “Culture is only an asset when children are connected and grounded, particularly when the culture they belong to is treated as ‘other’ by the dominant culture” (p. 325). Clearly, educating for success among Aboriginal students in Canada involves strong emphasis on cultural traditions and the recognition that values and the context of values in Aboriginal tradition are different from those of mainstream cultures (Paul, 2009).

The land and traditional homelands are seen as a source of education, social well-being and spiritual health for Aboriginal people (Altamirano-Jiménez, 2009; Nicholas, 2006; Todd, 2000/2001). Kirmayer, Brass and Valaskakis (2009) observe that, “Knowledge of living on the land, community, connectedness and historical consciousness all provide sources of education and knowledge” (p. 464). Educational perspectives and offerings that encourage a solid family foundation, trusting relationships with teachers and pride in cultural heritage also work towards enhancing self-efficacy and the strong spirit of achieving success in students (Fleet, Kitson, Cassady & Hughes, 2007; Gomez, 2005; Morales, 2008; Waller, 2002).

Indigenous peoples’ cultural traditions are still often taught through story and narrative; many are instructional for perseverance and endurance to achieve desired life goals (Abadian, 2006; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004; Tousignant & Sioui, 2009). Aboriginal education, whether formal or informal, very often includes Elders, as their own life accounts readily translate into knowledge generation for younger and peer groups (Atleo, 2009; Meadows, Thurston & Lagendyk, 2009; Rieken, Scott & Tanaka, 2006). Silko (1996) articulated the powerful link between the Elders with their stories and life beyond: “The old folks said the stories themselves had the power to protect us and even to heal us because the stories are alive; the stories are our ancestors” (p. 152). The concept of the connectedness and flow of life past with present, represented mainly by the narrations of the Elders who demonstrate the skills needed for enhancing self-identity, memory-keeping and meaning-making, is common among Indigenous peoples (Marshall, 2001; Sutherland & Henning, 2009).

FNIM students, then, need an education for two worlds (Baloy, 2011). Guided knowledge must be developed for their success in the mainstream, and for their survival as distinct peoples (McLeod, 2008). The fundamental moral right of Aboriginal peoples for self-determination within their epistemic heritage was recently recognized in the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.



Integration of these two worldviews can offset the effects of cultural mismatch by helping Aboriginal students “reconnect with self, others, and the true history of their peoples”

(Acoose, 1995, p. 20).



In the area of human resources development, to advance the cultural enhancement goals of school districts, some key positions such as Aboriginal Education Specialist (or equivalent) should be reserved only for Aboriginal people. In BC, for example, School District 23 received a Human Rights exemption to hire only Aboriginal persons for certain employment opportunities. The Human Rights Commission approved the preferential hiring of qualified people of Aboriginal heritage; these efforts were facilitated and accomplished through the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

EVIDENCE-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS (Increasing Cultural Understanding)

Aboriginal ancestry as bona fide occupational requirement. Hiring Aboriginal teachers, principals and other educators is of paramount importance and school boards/schools must choose to see the value of hiring more Aboriginal people. First, it is important that FNIM students see Aboriginal role models within their school environments. Second, Aboriginal candidates often come with knowledge or understanding that will support both student and school board success. Third, it shows an understanding of the injustices (both historical and in current systems) that have precluded Aboriginal people from being part of schools to date.

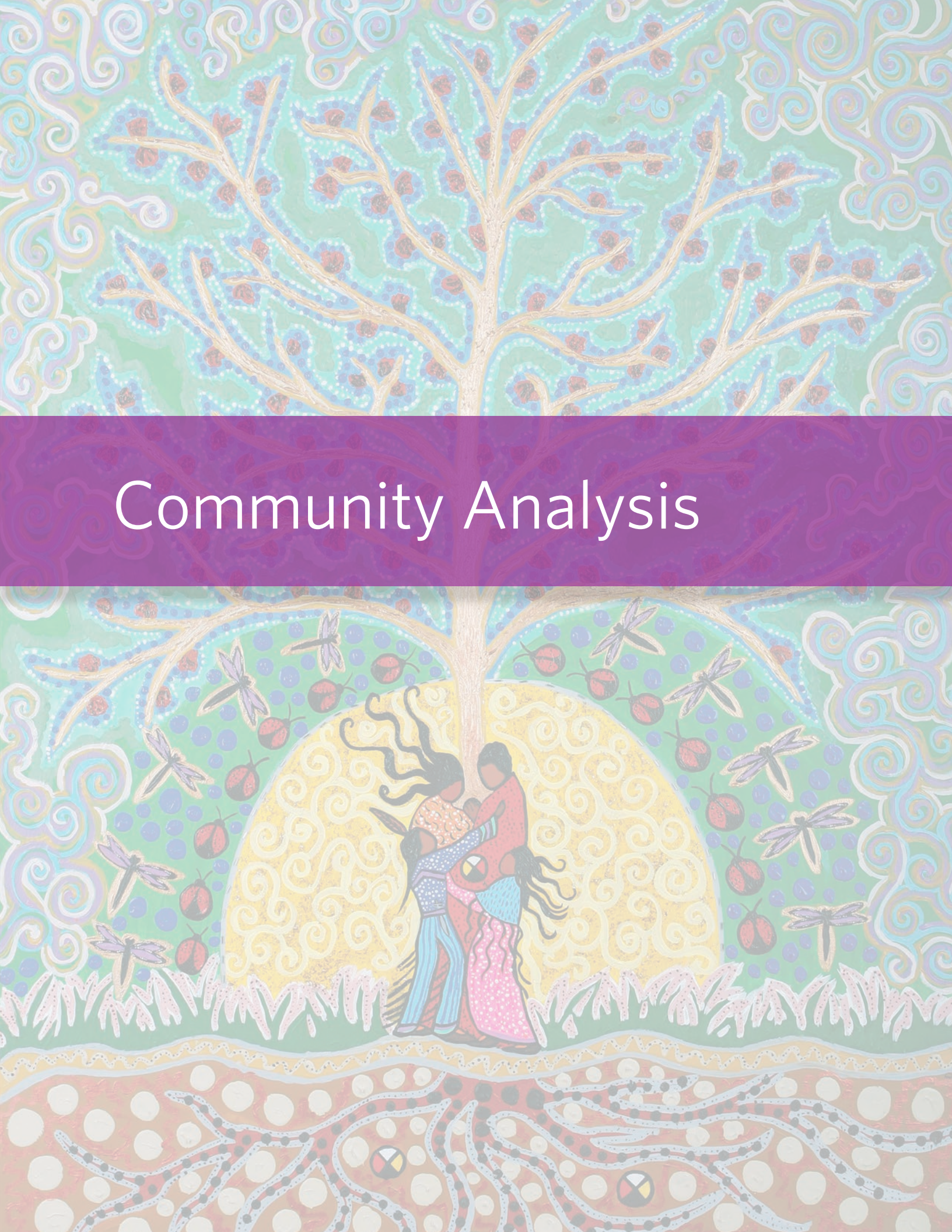
- Job postings for certain positions should be clear that they are only for Aboriginal people, such as successful candidates being Aboriginal and self-identifying as Aboriginal.
- Human Rights legislation protects Aboriginal ancestry as an bona fide occupational requirement in many cases. Contact CUPE and/or other related unions/federations to help with articulating job requirements earmarked for Aboriginal people that honour Human Rights legislation.
- Find exceptions or accommodations with unions to ensure that there is an open process to attract more Aboriginal employees.

See value in Aboriginal employees. Aboriginal teachers should be encouraged to focus on sharing personal reflections, narrations, and experiences to enhance methods of thinking, teaching, and learning for both students and school staff.

Include Aboriginal community in teaching. Cultural teachings for students, school staff and teachers must show a commitment to represent Aboriginal people accurately and to collaborate with Aboriginal groups to achieve this goal. The community knows the cultural leaders who can be the most effective in school settings. It is imperative that schools value this type of knowledge-keeper as they would any other educational specialist (including remuneration)

Revise curriculum. To shift to new curricula and make them more effective, a decolonized approach to Aboriginal knowledge, language and education is in order, and also to preserve the linguistic and cultural integrity of Aboriginal communities. Schools and school boards can lobby the province for these changes.





Community Analysis

Community Analysis: Ottawa

Presently, the Ottawa's District School Boards' consultations with the Aboriginal community tend to be on an *ad hoc* basis. The approach can be described as scattered, and attempts to engage FNIM communities most often comprise one-time meetings with a small group of parents, community members, organizations and agencies with an agenda developed by the school board. Evaluation or follow-up of these meetings tends to be either sparse or completely non-existent. As well, while the School Boards have offered Aboriginal education conferences, symposia for teachers and school board administrators (eg., principals and vice-principals), and cross-cultural training on Aboriginal issues, only small numbers of school board teaching staff have been able to attend. Consequently, and in the absence of either the OCDSB or the OCSB creating an Aboriginal Education Committee – one of this Report's recommendations – members of several Aboriginal agencies formed a committee in 2012.



This Aboriginal Education Committee of the Ottawa Aboriginal Coalition established a goal of working with the Ottawa area school boards to develop policies that allow for local and regional differences among the Aboriginal populations.

The authors of this Report repeatedly heard Aboriginal community leaders cite frustration and fatigue at being called on for input by one or more school board staff for various opinions or viewpoints. These leaders see beyond simply sending a staff member or two to try to educate school board staff about who the Aboriginal people are, what they want from an educational system or how to increase Aboriginal self-identification. They would, instead, very much appreciate the superintendents' and school trustees' understanding of the "big picture" of FNIM realities regarding education rather than getting bogged down on specific details or being distracted by what are considered confusing details – which, judging by school staff's attitudes and actions, are apparent. Particularly frustrating for members of the Aboriginal community is trying to converse with non-Aboriginal school board 'Aboriginal Education Specialists' who manifest little background knowledge of the issues.

In spite of Aboriginal distinction and constitutional recognition, the First Peoples are nearly invisible in educational programming, and this is an issue. Further, content that is presented favours First Nations over the Métis and Inuit and use of the word "Aboriginal" most often blurs the distinctions among the three identity groups. Teacher students need the knowledge and comprehension of the FNIM peoples and their unique traditions, histories and lived experiences within colonialism-inspired governments. Dr. Susan D. Dion, in her research and analysis of Métis content in Ontario Faculties of Education (Our Place in the Circle, 2012, p. 4), stated that, "It was Aboriginal scholars who pointed out that while we claim to do Aboriginal Education what we really mean is First Nations Education." She observes the following:

This research confirms what many Aboriginal educators and students already knew: Métis Education is not being adequately addressed in initial teacher education programs in Ontario . . . recently certified teachers do not feel confident or competent to teach Métis content. (p. 4)



Dion's statement is especially pertinent because participating teacher graduates expressed the importance of integrating Métis content in their teaching, and were looking for resources and guidance on how to accomplish this appropriately. Dion confirms this reality: "... the overwhelming impression is that although there is a lot of talk about the need to address Aboriginal education, professors in Faculties of Education are not yet doing so."

Student teachers also questioned the feasibility of Faculties of Education addressing Aboriginal issues in specific accredited coursework. Dion's supportive response is that

This would be a major step on the road to representation, social justice, equity that would tie contemporary Canadian education to its complicated and conflicted history in a way that could open students to their present commitments and responsibilities to Aboriginal people. (p. 18)

Given Dion's findings that both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal prospective teachers are not taught about the First Peoples, one can conclude that those knowing Aboriginal cultures from lived experience ought to have preferential treatment for certain Aboriginal-related positions within school boards. It is appropriate to employ only Aboriginal people for certain positions. Aboriginal people can actually see beyond the argument of union or contract issues when a non-Aboriginal employee is positioned as, for example, an "Aboriginal Education Specialist". School boards and other employers have successfully accommodated or extended "preferential treatment" to different groups such as new Canadians; they have a myriad of acceptable exemptions to their hiring policies in order to procure the right person for the job. There is absolutely every reason to emphasize, in job postings for *Aboriginal Education Specialists* and other similar positions, that being Aboriginal is a pre-requisite for anyone who applies (See page 2 of Appendix 1).

The question should be asked as to why Aboriginal people keep facing such basic employment-related obstacles as articulated in this Report. School boards must begin to perceive Aboriginal people as a vital human resource and consider job opportunities for them; excluding Aboriginal applicants by rejecting their applications because of union or contract stipulations can involve the unions themselves or the Canadian Human Rights Commission for resolution. While this is an extreme action because it would hinder potentially respectful and trusting relationships, school boards are perfectly positioned to be accommodating employers of qualified Aboriginal people.

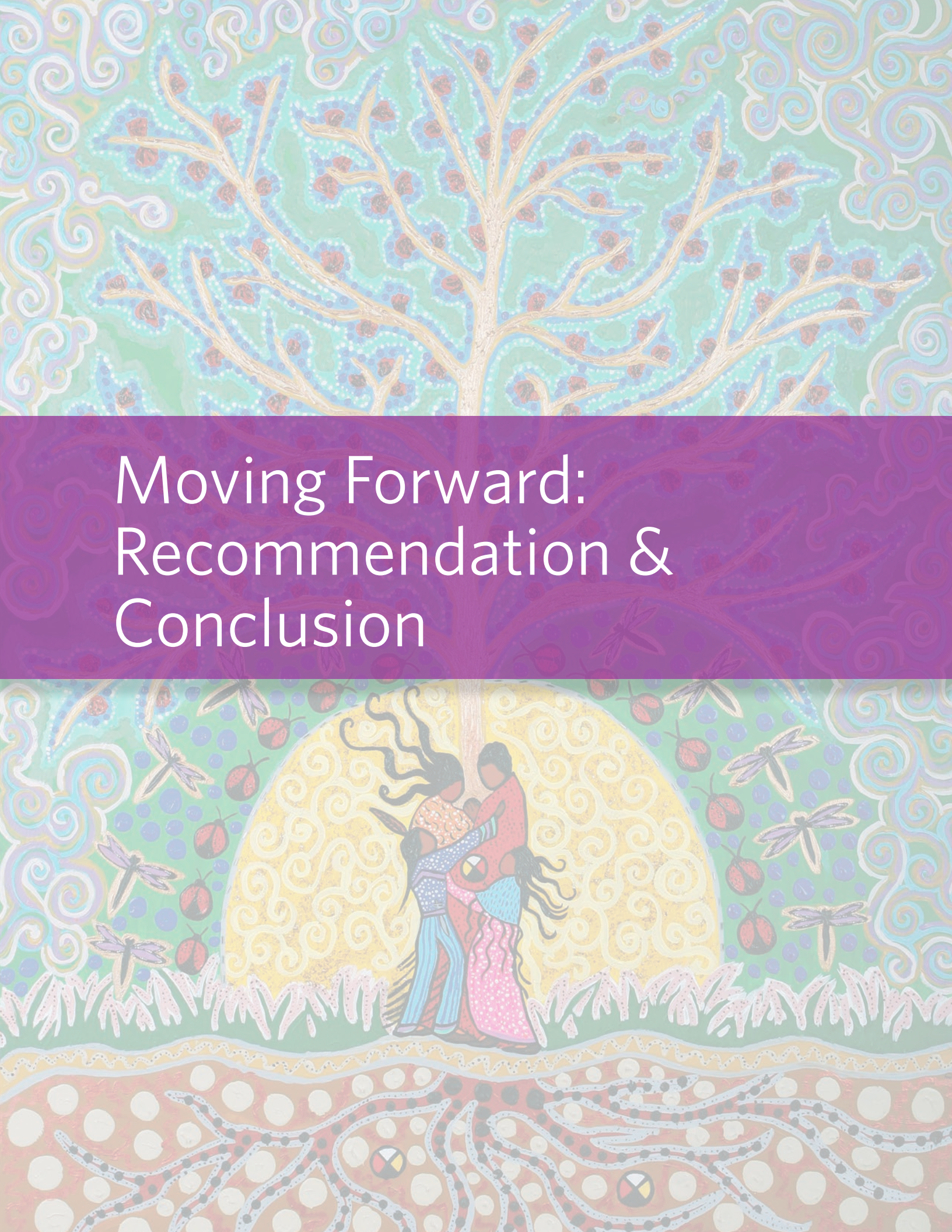
Suggestions for Ottawa Educators

1. **More creative and innovative ways of bringing in First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures and histories into the schools and curricula should be explored.** Implementing change can be as simple as a bold, envisioned principal deciding to replace *Macbeth* or *A Tale of Two Cities* with *Three Day Road* (by Métis novelist Joseph Boyden) or *Monkey Beach* (by First Nations author Eden Robinson). All principals and teachers would do well to question whether students really need to know about the plight of the French peasantry demoralized by their aristocracy over two hundred years ago, or a four-hundred-year-old play about deceitful ambition for power in England. Might it, in fact, be entirely possible that students should be learning about Aboriginal people and Aboriginal cultures that have shaped the very country in which they live?



2. **The Report authors were informed by the FNIM individuals they interviewed that Aboriginal people do not see themselves as simply another “diversity group”, nor do they want to be considered as such.** Without doubt, this preference represents truth, considering their unique place as Original Inhabitants of the lands that came to be known as Canada. They, as Aboriginal Peoples are specially placed within the *Constitution Act, 1982* – although that is not, by any means, the source of their identity nor validates them as a distinct people – Aboriginal peoples are a legitimate people within their own rights who signed treaties on a nation-to-nation basis with the British Crown. FNIM individuals in Ottawa question why a Superintendent of the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board who is responsible for diversity is also responsible for the Aboriginal community. FNIM individuals question whether the closeness of “diversity” to “Aboriginal” is a coincidence or if it is another well-placed and not-so-subtle Canadian way of locating Aboriginal people on hierarchical levels far beneath them. Muslims, Catholics, Italians and Somalians, as examples, are not specifically identified in Canada’s constitution, yet Indians (meaning the First Nations), Métis and Inuit are. In reality, this identification signifies the extreme difficulties that the First Peoples have endured to be “Canadian” – this includes the Indian Residential School system, the North-West Half-Breed Scrip Commission and forced Inuit relocation. Instead of honouring the special place Aboriginal peoples should have in this country, it sometimes seems as though Aboriginal people are made to feel like poor relatives by those in power.





Moving Forward: Recommendation & Conclusion



Moving Forward: Recommendation & Conclusion



This report has one major recommendation: the creation of an effective process and model that ensures and maintains Aboriginal student success in the Nation's Capital Region.

It is meant to be the foundation for a culturally-based, collaborative Aboriginal education program. From the literature review and the all the case studies, this is the only way to move forward using the Mohawk concept for the “future-now”.

Ontario school boards receive the same funding structure as other school boards across Canada (\$1000 per Aboriginal student). Other school boards in Canada, as highlighted in the case studies, have had proven success in developing comprehensive Aboriginal programs based on this funding structure. The models from British Columbia's School Districts No. 23 (Central Okanagan) and No. 73 (Kamloops/Thompson) are indeed worthy of emulation as demonstrated by their achieving long-term and consistently-improving graduation rates for Aboriginal students.

There is not a financial barrier for Ontario school boards to implement something similar. The Aboriginal communities in Ontario have been very patient with school boards in waiting for their leadership in Aboriginal education – true, meaningful action and engagement to deal with the inequalities of Aboriginal student successes in Ontario.

Based on the best practices of the five case studies, the Wabano Centre offers a circle model for school boards to consider when developing an Aboriginal program or school (*Refer to Executive Summary*). It carries the Aboriginal teachings of inclusivity and equality; ensuring that Aboriginal culture and teachings are the foundation of the model.

Aboriginal Education Program: What would it look like?

Wabano's circle model includes an Aboriginal Education Program. This program would:

- have the sole mandate to create transformation in the Five Area of Aboriginal Student Success (*Refer to Executive Summary*).
- be funded by the school districts (through Ministry-designated funding for Aboriginal students)
- be resourced with Aboriginal employees and Aboriginal contractual workers (community experts for cultural learning), and
- be overseen by an Aboriginal Education Committee. This Committee would have representation from all partners in the model.

Aboriginal Education Committee: What would it look like?

Case studies included in this Report show the critical importance of Aboriginal Education Committees (AEC); these AECs are outside the school boards, comprise a separate partnership



group and are funded by the school board. As such, to ensure the recommended circle model is actualized, a subsequent recommendation from this report is to establish a genuine and authentic Aboriginal committee within each school board.

For this committee to have meaningful impact, it must be more than simple lip service to Aboriginal communities relying on already overly-burdened community organizations and members. Building on the proven impact of other cities, Ottawa's AEC would:

- be an authority on Aboriginal education;
- carry the power of funding oversight and decision-making on all aspects of the Aboriginal Education program;
- be tasked with addressing longstanding and outstanding Aboriginal issues with the power and authority to bring their recommendations before elected school board trustees;
- have full knowledge of the funding flow and amounts directed from the Province and all other sources for Aboriginal students, and tracks all expenses. The process would be transparent, with built-in accountability measures that facilitate well-functioning audits;
- support teacher development and training. The onus for educating school boards' staff should not be on Aboriginal individuals or groups. Educating teachers takes place at the university level, and there is no reason that student teachers should not learn about Aboriginal history, tradition and culture at that level. The AEC would use a strategic, well-planned methodology and delivery system to ensure education faculties offer mandatory courses on Aboriginal education-related issues. These courses would go beyond Impromptu workshops which can put both human resource pressures and financial strain on Aboriginal non-profit organizations when they educate educators about First Nations, Inuit and Métis issues.



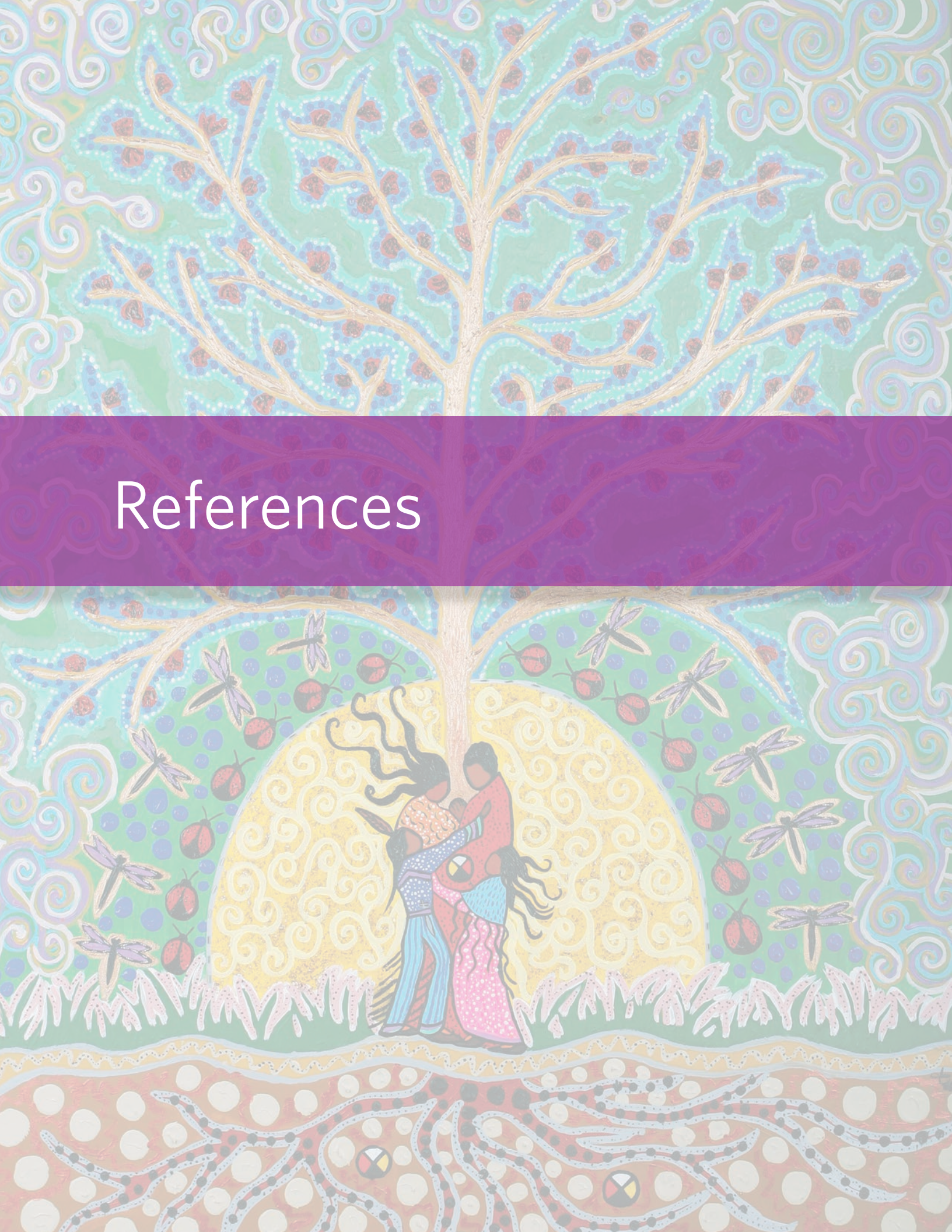
The name of this report, Pe Nah To Tah, means “come and listen” in Cree, one of Ontario’s many first languages. At the beginning, it is a gentle but persistent invitation to school boards to open up their hearts and minds to sit down with First Nations, Inuit and Métis families to learn how best to teach their students. However, as time passes and changes do not happen, the term Pe Nah To Tah changes from “come and listen” to “you are not listening”.

School boards that are truly earnest about entrenching long-term changes that drastically improve Aboriginal students’ graduation rates (and sustain that improvement) must begin their tasks with meaningful and respectful consultation with FNIM parents, organizations and communities.

Partnerships between School Boards, Districts and Aboriginal communities can be difficult at first; but as with all case studies reviewed in this report, these relationships improve exponentially over time, as all parties learn to trust one another and work hard together at the long-term “Big Picture” (common vision) of improving the rates of Aboriginal students’ success within the province’s educational system.

This is Pe Nah To Tah in practice.





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Appendix