

Winter 2023-2024

# Leaders & Learners

The official magazine of the Canadian  
Association of School System Administrators

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# Responding to the *Truth and Reconciliation* Calls to Action



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**On the Cover** • This issue's cover features photos from two articles, 'A Journey Toward Meaningful Reconciliation' on page 11, and 'Journeying the Path to Reconciliation with Reflective Leadership' on page 19. Thank you to Dr. Clint Moroziuk and Anna Villalta, respectively, for these beautiful photos.

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**“Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem, it is a Canadian problem. It involves all of us.” - Honorable Murray Sinclair**

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**Kevin Kaardal**  
CASSA/ACGCS President

**E**very November, I attend the British Columbia School Trustees Academy (BCSTA). For the past few years, BCSTA has been focused on Truth and Reconciliation. A year ago, we were profoundly moved as we listened as residential and day school survivors courageously shared painful memories of being torn from their homes, enduring punishment for trying to hold onto their cultures, and suffering abuse. The presenters also graciously shared their hope for a better future and inspired us with a vision for reconciliation.

This year, First Nations Education Steering Committee Executive Director Deborah Jeffrey and keynote speaker Rose Lemay spoke about education’s journey towards Truth and Reconciliation. Deborah focused on new requirements from provincial legislation and the British Columbia Tripartite Education Agreement, and Rose spoke about progress towards reconciliation that is occurring across the country. They both emphasized the responsibility on trustees, senior staff, and educators to create safe schools that reflect the true history of Canada, emphasize the truth about Indigenous leaders and heroes, and ensure all students are treated with dignity so they can envision futures with unlimited possibilities.

September 30 marked the third annual National Day for Truth and Reconciliation in Canada, giving communities a day to reflect on the legacy of residential schools for both Indigenous Peoples and our society at large. In our schools in the

Central Okanagan, the week leading up offered many opportunities to learn about the children who never came home, the survivors, and the impacted communities, while reflecting on Indigenous culture and traditions. We also observe Orange Shirt Day on September 30. Phyllis Webstad’s experience of having her new orange shirt taken away on the first day she attended a residential school at the age of six is a tangible reminder for students of the attempt to erase the culture and individuality of Indigenous youth.

As we reflect on the truth of a painful history, the Honorable Murray Sinclair reminds us: “Education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it.” While residential schools were designed to erase Indigenous culture, public schools can be places where Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers rekindle traditions with Indigenous students to ensure connections to the dignity and richness of their cultures. To paraphrase what scholar Kevin Lamoureux shared at the BCSTA Academy this past November, one of the greatest gifts public schools can give Indigenous students is the understanding that they are capable, that they are loved, and that their ways of knowing and traditions are relevant today.

To develop curricula and collaborations that can reach these goals is the task before us. In British Columbia, all graduates now require four credits in Indigenous studies, a requirement we have seen embraced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Our experience in Central Okanagan public schools shows that local collaboration (we are in our eighth Local Education Agreement with Westbank

First Nation) and fostering Indigeneity in schools improves outcomes: for the past six years, almost 100 per cent of Westbank First Nation students and 86 per cent of all Indigenous students graduate with dignity, purpose, and opportunities. School districts across the country see success at all levels through employing local Knowledge Keepers and Indigenous Advocates, creating Elders in Schools programs, and offering other services. Districts can also use Federal Jordan’s Principle Funding to enhance their collective efforts. While there is work to do, we know that work is accomplished through collaboration with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. Considering this path forward, we must remember the Honorable Murray Sinclair’s words: “Reconciliation is not an Aboriginal problem, it is a Canadian problem. It involves all of us.”

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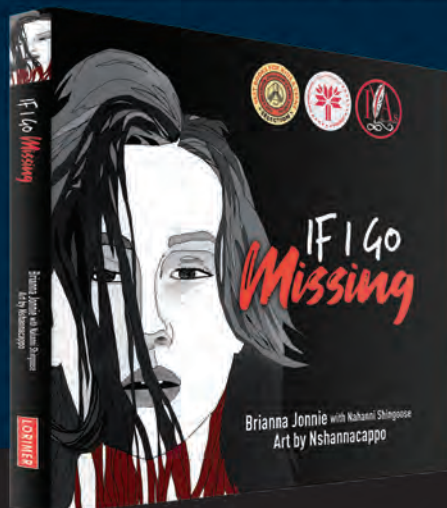
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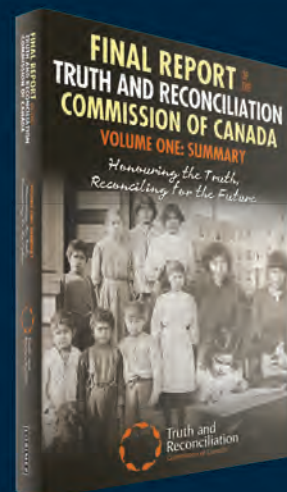
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**Ken Bain**

CASSA/ACGCS Executive Director

The theme of this issue of Leaders and Learners is “*Responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action.*” While the Calls to Action within the section entitled “Education” in the final report focus on the role of the federal government, the articles in this issue highlight how school districts throughout the country are, in their own way, striving to fulfill the promise of the calls to action that span other domains: language and culture, education and reconciliation, and youth programs.

We learn how students in Lester B. Pearson School Board (Quebec) expanded their knowledge of the Haudenosaunee People of the Longhouse and were inspired to create a quilt that is now being used as a teaching tool. Another article will explore the transformative journey towards includes invitations to attend First nations events and integrating Indigenous voices reconciliation which included a partnership between Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools and Alexander First Nation Education (Alberta). The education service agreement into the division’s First Nations, Metis, and Inuit Leadership Committee.

The Calgary Catholic School District (Alberta) is proud of the work by its Indigenous team related to Truth and Reconciliation. The article will outline the work including its successes and challenges. An article from Kelsey School Division (Manitoba) explores how in the non-Indigenous education leaders have responded to the Truth and Reconciliation final report and how the Kelsey School Division engaged in and responded to the call for reconciliation and indigenization. The Manitoba government released a policy framework including tools for reflection, planning, and reporting. Using these tools to decolonize the system, the educational leaders in Kelsey School Division are engaged in the process to indigenize the system.

The English Montreal School Board (Quebec) sees reconciliation in education as a means to create a more equitable, respectful, and inclusive educational experience for Indigenous students while fostering understanding and empathy among all students about Indigenous histories and cultures. The article will discuss the indispensable role of reflective practice in guiding school leaders toward the journey of reconciliation.

The final article comes from Canadian Rockies Public Schools (Alberta).

The article examines how a small initiative for Mini Thni students has blossomed into a powerful formal partnership with four dedicated Knowledge Keepers. Their mission includes responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls for Action and safeguarding Stoney Nakoda’s ancestral wisdom, traditions, and stories. The Knowledge Keepers have ignited a cultural resurgence and enhancing students’ experiences.

My thanks to the authors for their timely contribution and moreover express my appreciation for the outstanding work they do to fulfill the promise of the Calls to Action.

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Edgewater Elementary Giving Thanks quilt. Photos courtesy of Suzanne Simatos.

# Sharing Local Kanien'keha: ka (Mohawk) Way of life

By Suzanne Simatos, Lyne Mercier, and Brenna Macbeth, Lester B. Pearson School Board

**T**he Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created through a legal settlement between Residential Schools Survivors, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit representatives, and the Federal Government and the church bodies, which are the parties responsible for the creation and operation of the residential schools.

A full investigation into the extent of the harm caused by residential schools, proposals of solutions, and prevention of future abuse of Indigenous communities was the goal. This was done over a period

of several years by interviewing the very courageous survivors who came forward to officially document, their often extremely abusive experiences, as children, while they attended residential school. The Truth and Reconciliation commission produced 94 Calls to Action to address inequities and injustices, that persist today, in areas such as the health care system, the justice system and the educational system in Canada.

We at the Lester B. Pearson School Board (LBPSB) are committed to responding to the TRC Call to Action 62 and 63. We maintain an annual commitment to develop and implement Kindergarten to Grade Eleven curricula and learning resources on First Nation, Inuit, and Métis People in Canadian history and present

day, as well as to educate about the history and legacy of residential schools. The following is an example of how we are learning more about local Kanien'keha: ka (Mohawk) people.

Several students attending our schools are Kanien'keha: ka (Mohawk) from a local community called Kahnawake. We had the opportunity to invite some of their parents to speak to us about the Kanien'keha: ka Way of Life. They told us that if you would like to know more about us, you would need to know the Ohenton Karihwatehkwen, "The Words That Come Before All Others." They shared these teachings with us as an integral part of their Way of Life and we were both honoured and very thankful for this experience together.



To incorporate these teachings into the curriculum we selected Grade 3 social studies classes as students were already learning about the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) People, People of the Longhouse. Students at Edgewater Elementary School had been learning about Iroquois People but had not been taught about the Spiritual significance of the Longhouse. This project will discuss how, when the students were given the opportunity to expand their knowledge, they were inspired to create a quilt that is now used as a teaching tool.

Guided by Suzanne Simatos, students participated in a workshop sharing teachings from a book and video created by Jake Swamp called “Giving Thanks” an ancient message of peace and appreciation for Mother Earth and all her inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

Jake Swamp Takaronianeken was founder of the “Tree of Peace Society,” an international organization promoting peace and conservation. Chief Swamp delivered the Thanksgiving Address throughout the world, as well as the United Nations. He was born on the Akwesasne Mohawk Reservation in upstate New York. “Ohenton Karihwatehkwen Teiethinonwaratonhkhwa, translated from Kanien’keha: ka (Mohawk) meaning “We Give Them Thanks”, is an ancient message of peace and appreciation of Mother Earth and all her inhabitants,” said Jake Swamp Takaronianeken. “These words of thanks come to us from the Native people known as the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois or Six Nations – Mohawk, Oneida, Cayuga, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. The people of the Six Nations are from upstate New York and Canada. These words are still spoken at ceremonial and government gatherings held by the Six Nations.”

“Children, too, are taught to greet the world each morning by saying thank you to all living things,” he continued. “They learn that according to Native American tradition; people everywhere are embraced as family. Our diversity, like all the wonders of Nature, is truly a gift for which we are thankful. Our Kanien’keha: ka (Mohawk) language is very important to our people, for it is through our language that we can express our cultural identity. The book is dedicated to our children of today and of future generations.”

Students gathered in a sharing circle and were given scripts with the words and messages of peace and appreciation for Mother Earth and all her inhabitants. Students read

*From R to L: Lyne Mercier, Brenna MacBeth, and Suzanne Simatos, in front of the Edgewater Elementary Giving Thanks quilt.*



these “Giving Thanks” messages, out loud, helping to bring everyone together in a peaceful way and of good mind. As potential future leaders this experience was helping these learners to understand the first steps involved in becoming peaceful and of “good mind” when leading both themselves and others. We thank the Haudenosaunee People for sharing these important teachings with us.

Inspired by these teachings and with the guidance from teachers Lyne Mercier and Brenna Macbeth, students were asked to select an inhabitant of Mother Earth they felt was important to spotlight in a drawing. Once the rough draft was done students then painted the image onto a 10-inch by 10-inch cotton square. They then explained the importance of this gift from Mother Earth in keeping us healthy and happy. Written explanations were then transcribed onto cue cards in both French and English. The painted squares were then assembled into a large community quilt reflecting what the students had learned. The cue cards were then placed beside the quilt to educate passers by when they stop to study it. Students also taught fellow students by using the quilt to explain the teachings. During parent teacher night, parents asked questions about the quilt and were then educated about the teachings from the artwork their children had created.

The Giving Thanks quilt can also be gifted to other schools who agree to learn

more about this important message of peace and appreciation of Mother Earth. Our first quilt was gifted to the Kanien’keha: ka Onkwawen:na Raotitiokwa Language and Cultural Center, Kahnawake, as a thank you for sharing their knowledge and wisdom with us. Another quilt was gifted to the LBPSB, and one gifted to an elementary school. All gifting was done with an invitation to learn more about the Giving Thanks teachings and the Kanien’keha: ka Way of Life. We now often share the words from Giving Thanks when we open assemblies and important events.

This project will continue annually with the introduction of the Giving Thanks teachings shared by First Nation educators from local communities along with the resources created by Jake Swamp. ○

*Suzanne Simatos is a First Nation, Inuit, and Métis Liaison for the Lester B. Pearson School Board in Dorval, Quebec. Lyne Mercier has been teaching for 30 years for the Lester B. Pearson Schoolboard, and Brenna Macbeth has been an English Teacher with the Lester B. Pearson School board for 20 years.*

#### Reference:

1. Jim Reschke. “Giving Thanks A Native Good Morning Message.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PE2YHTSQVgY>.

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# A Journey Toward Meaningful *Reconciliation*



By Dr. Clint Moroziuk, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools, and Verna Arcand, Alexander First Nation Education

**I**n a profound commitment to fostering reconciliation with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students and families, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools has embarked on a transformative journey guided by the principles of truth, understanding, and partnership.

At the heart of this endeavor is the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Leadership Committee, a dynamic collaboration of trustees, division administration, and most crucially, representatives from local First Nations and Métis communities. This committee serves as a conduit for meaningful dialogue, ensuring that the voices of Indigenous communities resonate in the decisions and initiatives of the school division.

This inclusive approach reflects a broader commitment to not just acknowledge historical injustices, but actively work toward a future of unity and understanding. The involvement of community representatives brings authenticity and cultural insight, ensuring that the strategies implemented are not just well-intentioned but also culturally sensitive and effective.

## **An essential partnership**

One of the key partnerships on this path toward meaningful reconciliation for Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools is with the Alexander First Nation Education, a neighboring First Nation educational community with whom the school division has forged a deep and reciprocal relationship. The Kipohakaw Education Centre, the pre-Kindergarten through Grade 12 school on the First Nation, stands as a testament to the collaborative spirit between Greater St.



*TOP PHOTO*  
Dancers at the Kipohakaw Education Centre Pow-Wow. Photos courtesy of Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools.

*MIDDLE PHOTO*  
Students on Orange Shirt Day at J.J. Nearing Catholic Elementary School in St. Albert.

*BOTTOM PHOTO*  
Dancers at the Kipohakaw Education Centre Pow-Wow.



Albert Catholic Schools and Alexander First Nation Education due to their willingness to work together for the mutual benefit of students, staff, and families. Students, teachers, and members of administration of Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools have been invited to attend a Kipohakaw Education Centre Pow-Wow and participate in activities, including a march of solidarity prior to the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation.

This partnership extends beyond symbolic gestures; it manifests in a comprehensive Education Service Agreement that facilitates shared resources, knowledge exchange, and mutual support. The reciprocal invitations to events from both the Alexander First Nation community and the school division signify a commitment to building bridges of understanding and cultural exchange.

Verna Arcand, Assistant Director of Education with Alexander First Nation, serves as the liaison with partner schools and meets with each school at least twice per year. She also works with the families of First Nation students and serves as an advocate as necessary. Verna assists schools with Elder engagement and teachings and works directly with the school principals and staff in several schools within the Greater St. Albert Catholic School Division.

An example of such support and collaboration includes the coordination of a site visit and tour for a school principal and fourteen staff members from St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy in Morinville, Alberta, to visit the Kipohakaw Education Centre and spend the afternoon with the administration and staff who offered a presentation and an opportunity for the visiting educators to ask questions of their First Nation colleagues. Another of Verna's noteworthy contributions was assisting with an artist proposal as part of a legacy project at St. Kateri Tekakwitha Academy which honoured the school's namesake. The partnership has extended further by the generous lending of the custom-made Alexander First Nation Education graduation stoles to Morinville Community High School to be used by all First Nations, Métis, and Inuit students, which comprise approximately 20 per cent of the school's student population.

The educational initiatives emerging from this partnership are designed to be culturally relevant and responsive. By integrating Indigenous perspectives into the curriculum, celebrating Indigenous history and achievements, and fostering cultural competency among educators, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools aims to create an inclusive

and respectful learning environment for all students.

### Recognizing responsibilities

Although foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit and ensuring First Nations, Métis, and Inuit education for all students are part of the professional standards in Alberta (the Teaching Quality Standard, Leadership Quality Standard, and Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard, respectively), the school division recognizes its responsibilities to foster meaningful reconciliation. In fact, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools has prioritized its acknowledgment and commitment as a goal in their Three-Year Education Assurance Plan:

*“As Catholics, due to the historic role of the Church in the residential school system, we bear an additional responsibility to pursue reconciliatory actions within our schools. We prioritize teaching and learning of foundational knowledge of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit in an effort to foster healing and growth within our school communities.”*

Additionally, the aforementioned document features a depiction of St. Kateri Tekakwitha, the first Indigenous North American saint (and also a namesake of one of the Division's schools, as cited earlier), on the cover.

### Documenting progress

Six years ago, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools thought it important to document the work that they were doing relative to Truth and Reconciliation and did so by publishing a book of stories entitled *Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools' Journey in Education for Reconciliation*. The book notes the education for reconciliation calls to action and shares a variety of stories about the people, events, and significant work in which the school division has engaged, adding a new chapter each year. The first edition featured cover art by a division student and encapsulated five years of the Division's work in the area of Truth and Reconciliation. Last year, a new edition entitled *The Journey Continues: Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools' Ongoing Commitment to Truth and Reconciliation*, was published, featured Indigenous student art from a recent contest within the school division.

A few examples of the stories and accomplishments shared within the book include:

- Connecting Faith and Culture,
- Co-Creating a Locally Developed Treaty 6 Blanket Exercise,

- Elder Edna's Story as a Residential School Survivor,
- Literacy, Literature, and Truth and Reconciliation,
- Inculturated Mass and National Indigenous Peoples Day,
- Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools' Indigenous Literature Kit,
- Every Child Matters,
- Ground Truthing at Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools, and
- Alexander First Nation Education Celebration.

These two books endeavour to capture a snapshot of each year as Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools works together with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit partners to take meaningful action in the spirit of reconciliation.

### Final thoughts

The school division recognizes that the journey toward reconciliation is ongoing and multifaceted. It involves not only changes in policy and practice, but also a deep cultural shift within the entire community. By acknowledging the rich cultural diversity and wisdom of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools is taking significant strides toward a future where education is a bridge that connects, honors, and celebrates all voices.

As the Division continues this important work, it serves as an example for other educational institutions, illustrating that reconciliation is not a destination but a continuous journey – one that requires commitment, humility, and a genuine desire to forge meaningful connections with the communities it serves. Through collaboration, understanding, and shared aspirations, Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools and Alexander First Nation Education are sowing the seeds of a future where education is truly a force for unity, healing, and empowerment. ○

---

*Dr. Clint Moroziuk serves as the Superintendent of Greater St. Albert Catholic Schools, a school jurisdiction serving over 5600 students in three communities just north of Edmonton, Alberta. Over the course of his 26 years in education, he has been a teacher, assistant principal, principal, director, and assistant principal.*

*Verna Arcand was born and raised on the Alexander First Nation in Alberta, and serves as the Assistant Director of Education with Alexander First Nation Education (AFNE), home to the Kipohakaw Education Centre and Alexander Day Care Centre. Prior to AFNE, she was a post secondary advisor for 12 years.*



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# Navigating Successes and Challenges of Truth and Reconciliation

*Indigenous Education teacher, Wanda deLaronde, leading students in an activity about the "Winter Court." Photo courtesy of Helmut Kaiser.*

By Cynthia Launière-Zielke and Helmut Kaiser, Calgary Catholic School District

Calgary Catholic School District's (CCSD) journey working in Truth and Reconciliation is a testament to our collective commitment to respond to the 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Driven by a comprehensive approach and guided by specific focal points, CCSD has undertaken various initiatives and strategies to implement Indigenous worldviews in classrooms and foster understanding, respect, and meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities. In this article, we will explore the successes and challenges we have encountered as a school district on our path working through truths and journeying through action in our reconciliation.

One of our most significant achievements has been our unwavering commitment to Indigenous Education. Our Board of Trustees and our Chief Superintendent, Dr. Bryan Szumlas, have recognised Indigenous Education as one of our four district priorities which underscores our shared responsibility to make this a central focus in all 118 of our schools. This priority has allowed us to intentionally dedicate space and ensure that our students, parents,

educators, and the broader community are exposed to the rich tapestry of Indigenous cultures, histories, and perspectives.

The focal points in our Indigenous Education priority include shared responsibility of advancing Truth and Reconciliation, empowerment of Indigenous students and their successes, and nurturing relationships with Indigenous communities, which have been instrumental in fostering understanding and empathy within our school community. We can see these focal points in action, which are enriching both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students' education by making space for the Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and traditions.

The presence of a dedicated fulltime district Elder within CCSD serves as a source of wisdom and cultural guidance for all of us. The Elder's role in providing consultation and insights on Indigenous protocols, truths, worldviews, traditions, and ceremony which ensures that cultural sensitivity and understanding are an integral part of our educational philosophy. Our students have had the privilege of learning from and interacting with our Elder, enriching their perspectives, deepening their empathy, and understanding of Indigenous cultures.

The collaboration between our Indigenous Education team and the Religious Education

department, resulting in the creation of a three-part video series, has provided a platform for meaningful discussions on truths, healing, action, solidarity, and reconciliation. This resource has sparked insightful conversations within our community, fostering our collective commitment to Truth and Reconciliation by learning, unlearning, and relearning for a better future together.

The monthly scheduled Elders Circles of Treaty 7 and additional Indigenous Cultural liaison workers demonstrates our commitment to infusing Indigenous culture throughout our schools to support the calls to Action to renew the Indigenous culture for Indigenous students. This intentionally enriches the learning experience for our students and fosters a sense of belonging. Indigenous knowledge, culture, and traditions allow Indigenous students to succeed as they find their balance of mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

The implementation of Indigenous field trips for students, the Indigenous Friendship Centre, Aapaisitaapii Iissti Kaa Kuu, and our annual district-wide Indigenous Education professional growth day all contribute to a rich, authentic educational environment. Our students and staff have benefited from these experiences, which have broadened their horizons, nurtured empathy, and cultivated respect for Indigenous cultures.

The Seven Sacred Teachings project in all schools, developed in consultation with Indigenous Blackfoot Elders, exemplifies our commitment to authenticity and cultural sensitivity. Our staff and students have engaged with these teachings, which have instilled valuable life lessons and cultural appreciation for all and has made space for Indigenous teachings in classrooms.

The path to reconciliation is not a smooth trajectory nor easily mapped out and we must do this work together. Acknowledging the challenges, we face on our journey to Truth and Reconciliation is equally important. The legacy of trauma from the residential school system continues to affect families and children within our community, necessitating the provision of enhanced mental health support. We've witnessed the impact of this intergenerational trauma on our students and their families, underscoring the urgent need for continued mental health resources and support for years to come so that we may help bridge the gap for the Indigenous people.

The incorporation of Indigenous knowledge, culture, and perspectives into the broader curriculum is a complex and ongoing challenge. While commendable progress has been made, the need to infuse Indigenous content

throughout all curricular areas remains a work in progress as we engage with many stakeholders and cross many barriers along the way. We recognize the importance of a curriculum that reflects the diversity and richness of Indigenous worldviews, cultures, treaties, and histories.

One of the significant challenges lies in meeting individuals at various stages of their personal journey to Truth and Reconciliation. Recognizing that this journey is deeply personal and multifaceted, we face the task of providing tailored support and resources to guide individuals in their understanding and commitment to the calls to action for authentic reconciliation. This challenge underscores the need for empathy, patience, and a nuanced approach to fostering inclusive and supportive spaces within our school district. This also calls on all staff and Canadians to look at their unconscious biases and move to action.

Our collective commitment to responding to the 94 Calls to Action from the TRC has been reflected in our achievements and our ongoing challenges. Our dedication to Indigenous Education, cultural appropriation, supporting Indigenous students, and creating meaningful relationships with Elders and the Indigenous communities

enriches the educational experience for all our current students as well as those of tomorrow.

The challenges posed by intergenerational trauma, curricular integration, and the nuanced nature of personal journeys to reconciliation underscore the ongoing work that remains to be done. However, our shared commitment to addressing these challenges, with empathy, collaboration, and resilience, is crucial for creating an inclusive and transformative educational environment that honors the principles of Truth and Reconciliation. As a school district, we are inspired by the progress made and are committed to being a part of this collective journey toward a more equitable, culturally rich educational system that embraces diversity, Indigenous teachings and fosters deep empathetic understanding. ○

*Cynthia Launier-Zielke is the Supervisor of Indigenous Education for the Calgary Catholic School District, and is Maliseet from the Wolastoqiyik Nation in Quebec.*

*Helmut Kaiser is a Director of Learning Services with the Calgary Catholic School District.*



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# Indigenous Ways of Living and Learning in a Manitoba School Division

By Cully Robinson, Kelsey School Division



*The Indigenous Ways of Living and Learning PD day.*

**I**n 2023 a group of Manitoba administrators, teachers, and employees in Kelsey School Division (KSD) volunteered to form an Indigenous Education committee. They undertook this task in response to our large representation of Indigenous students, at least 70 per cent of our enrollment. In light of this, the committee chose to commit to address indigenous perspectives of living and learning in the remote urban community of The Pas in the Northern Region of Manitoba.

From the onset, the Committee's initiative had been formed to work in a collaborative partnership with the Indigenous Inclusion Directorate of the Manitoba Department of Education and Early Childhood Learning. The intent was to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, a federal commission chaired by Senator Murray Sinclair, which issued a final report that includes 94 Calls to Action. Most significant for the work of the Committee, the report also identifies the moral obligation of school and system leaders to facilitate systemic change.<sup>1</sup>

The work of the Committee identified the need to address specific cultural circumstances. Most education administrators and teachers in Canada have been raised in Western colonial systems of education that did not address indigenous ways of living and learning and offered Eurocentric views of Indigenous people in Canada. This has led to a dilemma for non-Indigenous educational leaders and teachers, even those who wish to be allies. A dilemma in the form of a knowledge gap that may impede reconciliatory work.



*The Indigenous Ways of Living and Learning PD Day. Photos courtesy of Marcia Novo, Principal of Kelsey School Division.*



In order to provide education for reconciliation, engagement with non-Indigenous educational leaders and other educators in the Kindergarten to Grade 12 education system was essential. In response to the TRC’s final report the work was to respond to the call for reconciliation, decolonization and indigenization through: “... Sharing information and best practices on teaching curriculum related to residential schools and Aboriginal history...” and “...Identifying teacher-training needs relating to the above.”<sup>21</sup>

In early 2023, the KSD Indigenous Education Committee spent many months of research and consultation turning the Manitoba Government’s authoritative documents into a plan of action. The primary documents were “Mamàhtawisiwin: The Wonder We Are Born With – An Indigenous Education Policy Framework”<sup>22</sup> and a companion document “Mamàhtawisiwin: The Wonder We Are Born With – Tools For Reflection, Planning, and Reporting.”<sup>23</sup> Using these tools to decolonize our system, the educators and leaders in the Kelsey School Division engaged in an on-going process to indigenize our system. They committed to learn and teach about the history and reality of colonization in Canada to help our schools build relationships with our Indigenous families and students; understand our indigenous students in a renewed context; examine and reduce barriers to increasing Indigenous student learning and deliberately work to become cultural allies.

It was recognized that this would be a long-term project of renewal and growth through significant training and education of non-Indigenous educators and the recruitment of Indigenous educational leaders. Through these measures, the Division and the Committee are seeking to effectively respond to the Calls to action with understanding, respect, and consideration of the lived experiences of the Indigenous students, families, and communities that we serve.

### The plan

The plan below (though not an exhaustive list) is being implemented by the Committee in a multi-pronged approach:

- Recognizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Final Report and the Manitoba Mamàhtawisiwin Indigenous Education Policy Framework documents as the authoritative documents that are the foundation of our work;
- Earmarking divisional resources and staff for Reconciliation work;

- Applying for additional funding through the Department of Education – Teachers Idea Fund;
- Hiring an experienced and certified teacher, with First Nation Status, as a full-time Indigenous Cultural Coach;
- Engaging with the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba and training staff and appointing catalyst teachers to the work of treaty education;
- Establishing that a minimum of one full day of Professional Development per school year would be dedicated to Indigenous Ways of Living and Learning for all staff;
- A commitment to sharing reciprocal Professional Development with the Opaskwayak Education Authority of the neighboring First Nation, the Opaskwayak Cree Nation (OCN);
- An open invitation to student teachers from University College North (UCN) to participate in our Professional Development; and
- Ensuring authentic involvement with local Elders and Knowledge Keepers – establishing a strong reciprocal relationship and providing adequate honorariums.

### New opportunities

In Kelsey School Division we understand that colonization involves more than one group of people taking control of the lands and resources of another group of people. It is also about the impact of taking away the languages, cultures, spiritual lives, and ways of being of other peoples. In Canada, human habitation began with Indigenous peoples and continued with European immigrants who arrived and claimed the lands as their own and established a Eurocentric culture. With colonization came new languages, practices, institutions, ways of being, believing, knowing, and assumptions that indigenous cultures inevitably could and should be swept aside and assimilated by the dominant Eurocentric culture and standards.

In light of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s final report and Calls to Action there is a growing understanding that the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is changing during a period of Indigenous resurgence. Hundreds of First Nations are reclaiming and restoring their culture, land, languages, and spirituality. Under these circumstances decolonization is generating renewed relationships between the peoples within Canada and Manitoba with new attention being paid to questions of inclusion and equity.

In the context of education, decolonization, reconciliation, and indigenization is about more than the removal or unraveling of Eurocentrism in our education system. Indigenization in our schools could be an opportunity for the addition of Indigenous elements. Effective indigenization moves beyond a yearly celebration as a gesture of cultural interest. Through indigenization relationships may be rebalanced and Indigenous ways of living and learning be adopted. In education this could include, at the very least and as a start, the inclusion of Indigenous readings, and adoption of Indigenous learning approaches in the classroom. Of course, and as a caution, for non-Indigenous people, there can be a fine line between Indigenization and cultural appropriation. It is essential to seek authentic involvement while recognizing that guidance can come from many sources such as Indigenous elders, Knowledge Keepers and respected artists and leaders.

The end goal of decolonization and Indigenization in schools should not be defined by non-Indigenous educators or governments. In Kelsey School Division, we think about the reasons we are decolonizing our schools. We think about who we are doing it for and why we are doing it. We are sensitive to avoiding tokenism and recolonization. Also, we know decolonization in schools is a long process and not about one group but all our students, colleagues, families and communities.

As Senator Murray Sinclair, Chair of the TRC Commission, once said, “Education is what got us into this mess...but education is the key to reconciliation.” ○

*Cully Robinson is Superintendent/CEO of Kelsey School Division.*

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# Journeying the Path to Reconciliation with Reflective Leadership

By Anna Villalta, CASSA

In answering the Truth and Reconciliation Calls, educational leaders are central to shaping a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. The path to reconciliation in education is a transformative endeavor, seeking to establish a respectful, inclusive, and equitable learning environment for Indigenous students. At the same time, it nurtures understanding and empathy among all learners regarding Indigenous histories and cultures. At the helm of this transformative voyage, system leaders hold a profound responsibility that calls for ongoing introspection and a commitment to continuous reflection. Within this journey, system leaders play a pivotal role, entrusted with the profound responsibility of nurturing reconciliation, and healing. Certainly, this journey is anything but stagnant; it's an ongoing odyssey that calls for continual introspection, reflection, and unwavering dedication to equity. This article embarks on a thought-provoking journey, shedding light on the pivotal role of reflective practice as the guiding North Star for system leaders on their path to reconciliation.

At the heart of reconciliation is the recognition of historical injustices that have deeply scarred Indigenous communities, injustices rooted in the dark chapters of colonization, and discriminatory policies that continue to affect their communities. Though present-day educational leaders may not have been responsible for these injustices, they all share the responsibility for the enduring legacy these actions have left behind. Understanding this legacy, and comprehending its far-reaching impact on our society today, is the vital first step toward healing and addressing the systemic inequities that persist within our educational system. Engaging in reflective practice enhances one's self-awareness, gaining a deeper understanding of one's thoughts, emotions, and actions by reflecting on experiences critically, developing compassion, and cultivating a deep understanding that extends beyond one's cultural background. It helps identify and address challenges by considering different perspectives, leading to better decision-making.

The power of self-reflection is a vital force, emphasizing the critical importance of embracing the rich tapestry of interconnected identities within our educational landscape. As leaders, it is our responsibility to embark on a meaningful journey toward reconciliation with an open heart and mind, with a vision of transforming our educational domain into a realm characterized by justice and promise. This endeavor enriches the lives of everyone involved and offers a compelling invitation to system leaders to explore the multifaceted dimensions of leadership, including growth and stronger partnerships with individuals of diverse or marginalized identities.

Equity-focused leaders distinguish themselves by their deep self-awareness, which they then translate into concrete actions. They acknowledge that despite the best intentions, unconscious biases may permeate our organizations. With humility and courage, these leaders challenge the status quo, confront their personal limitations, and champion the implementation of policies, processes, and structures that challenge entrenched organizational attitudes and practices.

To initiate the path toward becoming identity-conscious leaders, our journey begins with self-reflection and an exploration of our



*Indigenous reflective journey in art. Photo courtesy of Anna Villalta.*

identity, understanding how our individual identities colour our perceptions. Leaders should recognize the significant impact of their personal perspectives, which are shaped by factors such as personal experiences, race, socio-economic status, age, religious and cultural beliefs, ethnicity, and gender. Engaging in critical self-reflection is a fundamental aspect of these efforts, especially when it comes to understanding our roles within the intricate power structures of the education system. This process entails a reflective analysis of how colonialism continues to impact practices and policies within the school system, crucial for fostering understanding, challenging oppressive systems, and advocating for Indigenous communities while strengthening community resilience.

This journey also necessitates introspection and the recognition of our biases, where we ask ourselves open-ended questions, delve into our emotions, and seek to understand how our privilege influences our choices as leaders. It calls for a critical evaluation of whether our values align with our actions. But our mission doesn't end there.

It extends to active efforts aimed at dismantling systemic biases fostering open dialogue, building trust, and shifting perspectives. By creating a culture rooted in empathy, conflict resolution, and community-building, we incorporate restorative practices and encourage those we lead to be more compassionate and intentionally engage in similar acts. In this endeavor, we contribute to the development of a more equitable and reconciled community that welcomes all students, regardless of their Indigenous or non-Indigenous backgrounds. Our shared goal is to

illuminate a path toward a more promising, equitable educational future.

As leaders embark on this journey, these thoughtfully crafted questions may guide and prompt self-awareness, cultivating a new leadership perspective and contributing to a more equitable and reconciled educational environment.

- How do your personal identities and experiences shape your leadership and interactions?
- How can you actively engage in critical self-reflection to better understand your

own position within the power structures of education and address any racial inequalities that may exist?

- What were your earliest messages about Indigenous people (from experiences, school, or other) and how might they inform or impact your interactions with their community?
- What steps can you take to raise awareness of historical injustices experienced by Indigenous communities and their continuing impact on education? What available resources or partnerships can you connect with to ensure that Indigenous knowledge and pedagogies from their perspective are brought into classrooms?
- In what ways do your biases, whether conscious or subconscious, affect your decision-making and leadership practices?
- How can you establish a safe and inclusive space for open dialogue and reflection on reconciliation within your educational community?
- What measures can you put in place to challenge and change organizational attitudes, practices, or policies that perpetuate systemic biases? How are barriers to equitable education impacting students or staff?
- How can you use your position and privilege as an educational leader to actively contribute to efforts of reconciliation daily?

In closing, the transformative power of reflective practice transcends mere awareness. In this quest for understanding, healing, and reconciliation, reflective leadership emerges as a guiding beacon. As we foster an identity-conscious perspective, we empower ourselves as courageous leaders to embark on a journey that reshapes the very landscape of our educational system into one with the promise of a more just and reconciled society: One that opens its doors to students of all identities and illuminates the path toward a brighter, more promising future. ○

*Anna Villalta is a seasoned educational system leader from Montreal, Quebec, with a remarkable career spanning over thirty years. She serves as a board member of the Canadian Association of School System Administrators (CASSA) and holds an executive role in the Association of Administrators of English Schools of Quebec (AAESQ).*



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# Reviving Ancestral Wisdom: Mini Thni Partnership Ignites Cultural Resurgence

By Christopher MacPhee, Debbie McKibbin, and Nadine Dack-Doi, Canadian Rockies Public Schools

**D**eep within the picturesque expanse of Alberta's Canadian Rockies, a transformational journey of cultural revival is unfolding within Canadian Rockies Public Schools (CRPS). This journey is driven by a small but dedicated group of Knowledge Keepers from the Stoney Nakoda Nation: Virgle Stephens, Ollie Benjamin, Tracey Stevens, and Philomene Stevens. Their mission: respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls for Action, safeguard ancestral wisdom, traditions, and stories, and ignite a cultural resurgence across CRPS' seven schools.

The story began in 2018 when then-principal of Exshaw School, Nadine Dack-Doi, recognized the need to increase parent and community engagement and create a safe, welcoming environment for students and families. She reached out to the Knowledge Keepers, two of whom had grandchildren attending the school, and one was a parent. It was a decision that would set the stage for a profound transformation.

"I really wanted our Mini Thni students and families to know they were being heard," said Dack-Doi. "We also really wanted to bring our attendance up and have our families feel welcome in our school."

Deeply connected within the Stoney Nakoda Nation, the Knowledge Keepers initiated monthly visits to the school. Beyond their role as strategic thinkers, engaged in brainstorming strategies and connecting with families to dismantle barriers hindering students' attendance, they embarked on a journey that reached directly into the classrooms, where they shared their profound wisdom and rich cultural heritage. This approach became a cornerstone in establishing trust and nurturing a profound sense of belonging.

The fruits of these efforts were soon evident. In the inaugural year, attendance witnessed a modest yet promising five per cent



*Canadian Rockies Public Schools opening week, raising a tipi together. Photos courtesy of CRPS.*

increase, and in the subsequent year, this figure soared to an astonishing 10 per cent. However, as the world would soon come to learn, 2020 held unexpected challenges in store for everyone.

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it disrupted many aspects of life, including school attendance for Mini Thni learners. With students kept home to protect the elders they lived with, attendance became a challenge once again. However, the spirit of resilience persisted, and their partnership with Exshaw School grew stronger.

"My dream as a little girl was to help students so that they won't go through what we went through," said Tracey Stevens, who was a residential day school student. "I am living my dream to make the world better."

Recognizing the Knowledge Keepers' profound impact on Exshaw School, in 2021, Superintendent of Schools Christopher MacPhee formalized a divisional partnership through a simple handshake agreement. This marked



*Philomene Stevens and Knowledge Keepers at the Canadian Rockies Public Schools' opening week.*



*Philomene Stevens and Tracey Stevens speaking at the Canadian Rockies Public Schools' opening week.*

the beginning of a new chapter in the Knowledge Keepers' mission. Now, their pivotal role extended beyond one school to encompass all seven schools within the division. Teachers would find unwavering support, and students would engage in cultural activities seamlessly integrated with the curriculum.

In the realm of Social Studies alone, over the past year and a half the Knowledge Keepers have engaged students in curriculum activities that bridge the gap between the past and the present. From sharing the art of constructing tipi poles in Grade 6 to imparting the Stoney Language, revealing traditional landmarks, and exploring buffalo tanning in Grade 5, the Knowledge Keepers bring vibrant aspects of Stoney Nakoda heritage to life. Even in Grades 1 and 3, the Knowledge Keepers have ignited young minds with Indigenous stories that recount the origins of the world or have helped students delve into the timeless seasonal survival skills shared by First Nations for transportation, food and medicine gathering, shelter crafting, and land-based clothing production. These activities serve as more than just lessons; they are a journey of enrichment, instilling not only a profound understanding of Indigenous heritage but also nurturing a deep appreciation for the vibrant culture that continues to thrive within the CRPS community.

Knowledge Keeper Ollie Benjamin said he has observed a growing interest among students in how Indigenous peoples govern themselves, their history, and have shown a genuine interest to learn more about their culture.

But it's not just about the curriculum. The Knowledge Keepers are often invited to schools to help foster Truth and Reconciliation, such as Orange Shirt Day. Bringing their lived experiences of day and residential schools into the classroom has shed light on the historical context and the fight for racial equality, illustrating the deep impact of government policies.

"Truth and Reconciliation acts as a guide that helps us build strong relationships. This is why we do the work together," says Virgle Stephens. "We want all generations to continue to learn."

Ollie Benjamin beautifully summarized that "Truth and Reconciliation guides everyone towards living in harmony as the Creator intended."

Challenges have certainly marked the journey. The Knowledge Keepers noted some initial hurdles included helping staff understand the importance of Indigenous culture, especially given much of Indigenous knowledge is oral and not written. Additionally, stressing the importance of the area's history and upholding the significance of ceremony and protocols, too, at first was difficult but overcome.

"Our land and language are very sacred to the Stoney people. Our language comes from the mountains. We want everyone to understand the importance of language and where it comes from. Oral language has brought us very far. Through sharing our stories, it helps everyone," said Ollie Benjamin.

This transformative journey has not only deepened students' understanding of Indigenous culture but also is reshaping the

adult relationships within the community. In 2023/2024, CRPS' opening week for staff was unlike any other. The leadership team dedicated an afternoon to erecting a tipi with the Knowledge Keepers, symbolizing the significance of their wisdom and the unity of the community.

Residential school survivor Philomene Stevens said beyond CRPS, she recognizes a positive difference within the community of Canmore. "We receive lots of community support. I feel more openness whenever I visit," she said. "It gives me the courage to keep going, to want to help even more students – both Indigenous and non-Indigenous."

When asked how all school boards could work towards Truth and Reconciliation, the Knowledge Keepers extend invaluable insights. Drawing from their collective wisdom, they emphasize the importance of incorporating Indigenous ceremonies, like the pipe ceremony, to nurture relationships and effective communication. Furthermore, they stress the significance of building trust and honesty through practices such as offering tobacco and smudging. Simplifying their message, they advocate reaching out for assistance, assuring that Knowledge Keepers are willing to support the next generation. Finally, they highlight the importance of spending meaningful in-person time with Knowledge Keepers and Elders and the need to embrace Indigenous perspectives to enrich the learning experience for all.

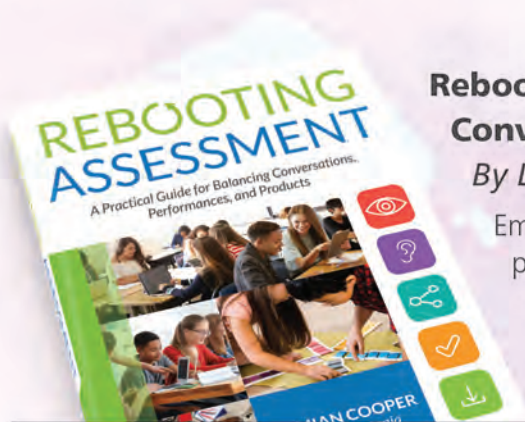
In closing, the partnership between CRPS and the Knowledge Keepers is more than just an initiative; it's a profound cultural resurgence. It's about bridging the gaps, fostering understanding, and embracing the wisdom and heritage of the Stoney Nakoda Nation. In these Knowledge Keepers, CRPS has found not only teachers but also storytellers, guides, and builders of a better future. The impact is felt in classrooms, communities, and the hearts of those who have embarked on this transformative journey together. The truth, the reconciliation, and the cultural resurgence continue, lighting the way for a brighter future for all. ○

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*Christopher MacPhee is the Superintendent of Schools, Debbie McKibbin is the Deputy Superintendent, and Nadine Dack-Doi is the Indigenous Services Coordinator, for Canadian Rockies Public Schools in Alberta.*

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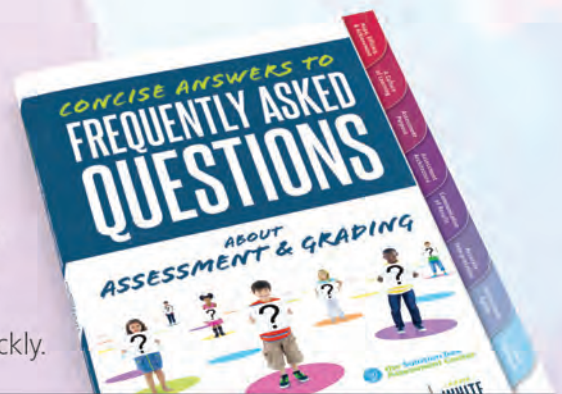
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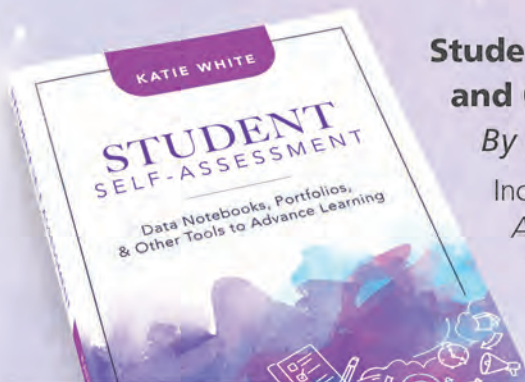
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