Working with Schools and the Community to Promote Aboriginal Student Success

By Corey Kapilik, Steve Lawrie and Christian Michalik

There are many ways of valuing and integrating Aboriginal perspectives into classrooms across Manitoba and improving Aboriginal student achievement. In the Louis Riel School Division (LRSD), over the last several years, we have collectively engaged in efforts to deepen our learning in cultural proficiency and social justice, to advance Aboriginal education and perspectives, and to strengthen our commitment to Aboriginal student achievement.

We recognize the need to engage in deeper learning with our Indigenous communities. The Seven Teachings are values that traditionally have formed the basis for a healthy Indigenous lifestyle and over the course of our journey in LRSD, we have incorporated these Teachings in many of our schools. They provide us a guide for living and learning together, and bring us closer together to form an inclusive and accepting learning community.

Two LRSD Administrative Guidelines speak to our commitment and our practice in Aboriginal education: IFC: Commitment to Aboriginal Perspectives in Education and IHB: Commitment to Aboriginal Student Achievement. These guidelines reflect our commitment to providing necessary resources and staff for this endeavour.

The René Deleurme Centre (RDC) to support collaborative learning and work with schools.

Strategic Learning Spaces and Resources

The René Deleurme Center (RDC) includes an interactive classroom, Smudge room, professional library, and community room. The Smudge room is a fully ventilated area we use to help students and staff learn about Smudging and traditional medicines. Smudging is not restricted to this area alone and is practiced in schools throughout the division.

The Interactive classroom is a space used for student and staff learning; there is space for activities, a sharing circle, and hundreds of artifacts for students and teachers to explore and learn from that extend the programming in schools. Each year, we bring over 150 classes of middle years students to RDC for a half-day of activities. The goal of this program is to provide engaging learning opportunities for students and to build greater teacher understanding. The sessions focus on specific curricular clusters. In 2014-2015, we were in year three of a three-year cycle, focusing on Grade 4 and Grade 6 social

Cree-Metis Storyteller

Duncan Mercredi shares traditional stories and the importance of oral tradition in Indigenous culture to Island Lakes Community School students to kick off a literacy through storytelling initiative.

Cultural Integration Specialist

Andrea Leach infuses Aboriginal perspectives into a Grade 5/6 classroom at Archwood School. She works with a number of people on this, including: Enrichment Program Teacher, Carol Bitchok; Cultural Integration Specialist, Darlene Tomsic; and ECHO/High School teachers, Rose Bird (Nelson McIntyre Collegiate), M’Shall Smith Daniels (Windsor Park Collegiate), Patricia Sayyes (Dakota Collegiate), Sean Oliver (Glenlawn Collegiate).
Nations, Métis or Inuit ancestry, while and stories, and explore writing and telling their own stories.

More recently, several elementary schools have begun using Aboriginal storytelling specifically for Aboriginal students and parents. The team also works closely with our preschool Family Centres, located in eight schools. Through outreach and programming, we are building relationships between families and schools. Each of the centres run programs specifically for Aboriginal students and parents. The goals of the program however, remain constant—to provide a supportive community to welcome students transitioning to high school, provide core courses enriched through a deeper focus on Aboriginal perspectives, increase belonging and community, strengthen family relationships, and enrich student learning and engagement through traditional teachings, supports, and opportunities. At Glenlawn Collegiate, for example, where the approach does not involve a distinct cohort, the ECHO teacher also nurtures a unique relationship with his students based on cultural similarities and values.

ECHO classrooms make the transition from elementary to high school easier by creating an enrichment space of cultural belonging for students of First Nations, Métis or Inuit ancestry, while also welcoming students who choose to be taught through an Aboriginal perspective. An initiative of the Aboriginal Department, ECHO was created in partnership with Dakota Collegiate, Nelson McIntyre Collegiate and Windsor Park Collegiate to increase student engagement for Grade 9 students, as they make the jump to high school.

ECHO offers a cultural enrichment classroom, with smaller class sizes and an Aboriginal teacher, where students stay together as a group for their four core subjects in Grade 9. ECHO is currently starting its fourth year and as programming grows and evolves, it looks slightly different from school to school. The goals of the program however, remain constant—to provide a supportive community to welcome students transitioning to high school, provide core courses enriched through a deeper focus on Aboriginal perspectives, increase belonging and community, strengthen family relationships, and enrich student learning and engagement through traditional teachings, supports, and opportunities. At Glenlawn Collegiate, for example, where the approach does not involve a distinct cohort, the ECHO teacher also nurtures a unique relationship with his students based on cultural similarities and values.

Elidda McKay, a student at Nelson McIntyre Collegiate who has benefited from and contributed to the ECHO program, shared her thoughts with our trustees at a school board meeting in June 2015: “I’ve been in ECHO since it first began three years ago. It has helped get me through a lot and were it not for this program, I would not be graduating next year. An Aboriginal teacher teaches the ECHO program and it’s pretty awesome! You walk into the room and you see a whole bunch of Aboriginal work and music. When I walk into class, I see a reflection of what I’ve done and myself. It makes you feel right at home. This program showed me the way to graduation and a future. I can see and feel how far I have come. I feel so welcomed and accepted that I love being able to come to school every day. I have such a good connection with my teacher. Were it not for her, I probably would not be the person I am today. And for that, I thank her very much and I thank the ECHO program.

My teacher has not only taught me about academics, but also about who I am and my place in this world.”

Voice and Leadership

Elidda and all of our students need to have their voices heard and need to be leaders within our community. In the service of this objective, we had a team of educators travel to South Dakota in June for the Reclaiming Youth International Conference with Dr. M. Brokenleg. This team of educators, working alongside the students, will form a committee to plan for a Youth Leadership for All Nations Conference in the spring of 2016.

For Susan Ciastko, a vice principal at Hastings School, “the conference in South Dakota served as a reminder of our professional responsibility in building positive relationships and provided an opportunity to collaborate and recognize the leadership strengths of an eclectic group of educators as we embarked on the early planning stages for a spring youth conference.”

Susan’s takeaway was, “While elaborating on the traditional teachings, Dr. Brokenleg applied the philosophy of the Circle of Courage (Belonging, Mastery, Generosity and Independence) to his discussion on creating well-being in schools. In so doing, he focused on the benefits of collaboration among staff, becoming emotionally intelligent, and growing professionally. All of which, Dr. Brokenleg tied to developing relationships, which ultimately enhance student learning. This especially resonated with me as it dovetailed well with our divisional priorities of engagement, achievement and citizenship.”

Nicole Mager, a vice principal at Victor Mager School, shared powerful insights about her journey of learning. “First off, I want to begin by thanking you for the amazing opportunity to extend and deepen my understanding of the circle of courage in South Dakota. I began my journey in 2009, when I had the opportunity to learn with Steve VanBockern. I was instantly a believer as he talked to us about risk versus resiliency. After this, I still wanted to gain a deeper understanding about the Circle of Courage. In Nashville, I completed the Response Ability Pathways and heard

The Medicine Wheel is a traditional Indigenous tool for learning and understanding. Every nation and every person is represented on the wheel. The wheel teaches us that we are all responsible for each other and the world we live in.
Dr. Martin Brokenleg speak. I have since been using the circle of courage model in both classrooms and when working with students one-on-one. I developed a poster project to teach the model and the importance to students. I really was so excited to go to South Dakota to hear about the circle of courage again because things change and ideas evolve.”

We have scheduled a Youth Leadership for All Nations Conference for spring 2016. It will include a large number of students from all LRSD high schools, and will be held at multiple sites, with all sites being connected via streaming video. Each site will host a component of the conference. The themes of the conference will focus on traditional knowledge, the Medicine Wheel, health, and reconciliation.

Leading up to the conference, students will create digital media to tell their stories and share their cultures. In June, we will celebrate what the students have gained and what each school has done to continue on the theme of reconciliation in their school, city, and country. We intend to share a collection of video, art, and other media on our website.

A Mentorship Program initiative begins this year too, matching high schools with elementary schools for a lunch mentorship program. From September until December, our high school students will meet bi-weekly to look at leadership and culture from an Indigenous perspective. The high school students will work with the Aboriginal Education team to develop programming for the elementary schools that focuses on the Seven Teachings, the Medicine Wheel, Aboriginal crafts and cultural activities (storytelling, drumming, beading, jigging, and games). From January to May, each mentorship group will have seven sessions where students will have lunch together in a sharing circle as mentors and mentees.

Commitment to Deeper Learning

Last school year, a Treaty Education Initiative was offered in cooperation with the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba. At least one administrator represented each LRSD school. In total, 140 LRSD administrators and teachers have been trained in the materials. For this school year, teachers and administrators who received the training will begin sharing with their school community.

We will also bring a divisional team together to look at the materials and to develop a K-12 learning continuum with supporting professional learning resources. By 2017, our goal is to have Treaties taught at every grade level in every school. Treaty education offers an important opportunity for all of our students to learn about our shared history.

A cohort for a post-baccalaureate diploma in Indigenous education between the University of Manitoba and LRSD began in 2014. The last class will end in December of this year. Thirty teachers and administrators from LRSD will have participated in this cohort. We are now in conversations with the University of Manitoba to begin a cohort program for an Indigenous Education Master’s Degree.

Over the last two years, our divisional and school-based leadership team has made Indigenous perspectives a focus of our fall retreat conversations and this coming October we will have the privilege of hearing the Honourable Mr. Justice Murray Sinclair speak to us about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s findings and calls to action.

As well, a grassroots book club focused on indigenous issues calling itself the Circle of Knowledge and Influence (CKI) has formed over the last few years. We currently have 30 of our administrators who meet regularly to discuss books, as well as current events, topics, and issues. Most recently, we had Niigan Sinclair join our conversation.

In LRSD, our commitment to social justice, integrating and valuing Aboriginal perspectives, and to student achievement is an important journey. With strategic learning spaces and resources, the strength of student and staff voice and leadership, and our commitment to deeper learning, we look forward to cultivating greater equity and opportunities for all.

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