

“Nitohtamowin and Nisitohtamowin – Listening and Understanding” Report (2014)

SECTION ONE ONLY

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools

INTRODUCTION

Our starting place begins with the acknowledgement that we are located on Treaty Six Cree Territory. Treaty Six was signed in 1876 at Fort Carlton in Saskatchewan. The area covers central Alberta, Saskatchewan and parts of Manitoba, comprised of 50 First Nations.

Wetaskiwin borders the Maskwacis Cree Nation and serves a high percentage of Maskwacis families. In September 2014, our First Nation Metis and Inuit (FNMI) student population was twenty-six percent. However, in one half of our schools, approximately one in eight students are identified FNMI, while one in three students are identified FNMI in the remaining schools. One half of our FNMI students are living in Maskwacis Cree Nation.

We desire to have meaningful relationships with the Maskwacis 4 - Nations communities to improve the services and quality of education for all students and families. This report outlines some initiatives in 2013-2014 guided by the Maskwacis Education Council (MEC) that continue to provide focus and direction for Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools (WRPS) in order to address the Board’s Priority to “enhance the success the First Nations students and encourage the active involvement of their families.”

The report is organized in two sections. First, it reviews “**what we did and why**”. Then it reports “**how we did things and how we did**”.

SECTION ONE: WHAT WE DID AND WHY

The purpose of the Maskwacis Education Council is to effectively communicate with First Nations families and involve them in collaborative decision-making process. By involving families and collaborating with them, there is a commitment to listen and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, to ensure concerns and aspirations are reflected in direction undertaken, as well as to inform families about how their input is influencing decisions. At the heart of this purpose is listening and understanding.

Nitohtamowin and Nisitohtamowin – Listening and Understanding

“*Nitohta*” means *to listen*. It is a teaching mechanism in Cree culture that once said, you know it means *to listen*, to pay attention to what is being shared or about to be shared. The Maskwacis Education Council endeavors to give voice to First Nations families and community members by listening to them.

Effective listening is deliberate. It starts with asking questions. It is also a result of paying attention. It gives voice, providing families the opportunity to speak out. However, to be heard is also to be understood. Answers in absence of responsive action will not sufficiently demonstrate understanding. Effective listening involves the act of listening and the act of understanding. In Cree, “*Nitohtamowin*” means the act of listening and “*Nisitohtamowin*” means the act of understanding.

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In 2014 we continued to listen in deliberate ways. We listened directly. We listened to families and elders who attended Maskwacis Education Council meetings. We listened to families who participated in our spring conversations in the Buck Lake, Pigeon Lake and Wetaskiwin communities. We listened to students. We listened to stories about students and families from our Wahkotowin liaisons and our Wahkotowin teacher. We listened to our cultural adviser. We listened to Council Members from the Maskwacis Education Authorities. We also listened in a broader context. We listened to statements being gathered at the Truth and Reconciliation National Event held in Edmonton. We listened to academia reflections about Aboriginal education. We listened to Alberta Education for examples of “difference making”.

We also listened for understanding. While listening we paid attention. When listening we asked questions. As a result of listening we reflected and learned. Upon listening we shared what we learned, and when possible, acted responsively. Hence the name of this report - *Nitohtamowin and Nisitohtamowin - Listening and Understanding*. As we listen we gain and demonstrate understanding.

At the Heart of Listening

Willie Ermine (2009) reminds us of the importance of attending to an ethical space between one another. He said, “How human beings treat other human beings is based on our ethics; those things that have been given to us by our ancestors, our parents. A lot of how we engage in our relationships with other people are determined by these ethics.”

The Maskwacis Education Council constantly attends to ethical space by endeavoring to create safe conversation spaces – opportunities for listening and understanding. When First Nations families and community members meet with school district representatives they discuss what’s working and what needs to improve. They report what differences are resulting from the changes being implemented. A common purpose is the desire to improve the educational experience and outcomes for Aboriginal students and all students. The common ground is seeing one another as people first, possessing inherent value, valued beliefs and valued practices, before viewing differences through biased cultural or societal lenses. Establishing a common ground mitigates concerns that learning about differences becomes a path to discrimination. Finally, ethical space is a place of dialogue, where people can construct societies <schools and communities> based on our humanness – not prescriptions from the institutions or systems that try to run our lives (Willie Ermine, 2010). Without an ethical space, the meaningful construction of new learning will fall short. This attendance to ethical space is not only a practice that the Maskwacis Education Council uses to advance its work, it is a model that is being developed for schools to follow.

The term, *Nitohtamowin*, has reverence when placed in context and said in the Cree language. We have learned that within Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools we need to start from a place of listening in order for the right energy and respect to transpire in our relationship building process with families, students, Maskwacis community, school communities, and staff.

This process involves more than simply listening:

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Patience and trust are essential for preparing to listen to stories. Listening involves more than just using the auditory sense. We must visualize the characters and their actions [or what is being shared or about to be shared]. We must let our emotions surface. As the Elders say, it is important to listen with “three ears: two on the side of our heads and the one that is in our heart. (Archibald, 2008, p. 8)

In my role as Trustee and Chair of the Maskwacis Education Council (MEC), my goal is to capture the spirit of *Nitohtamowin*, through a variety of sources and, on behalf of the MEC, provide a report that continues to refine our focus.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada held its final National event at the Shaw Conference Centre from March 27 – 30, 2014. It was attended by various WRPS students, staff, trustees and community members. The profoundness of TRC has affected how we are listening and how we are attending to relationships with families, students, and community.

For 116 years, thousands of Aboriginal children in Alberta were sent to Indian Residential Schools funded by the federal government and run by the churches. They were taken from their families and communities in order to be stripped of language, cultural identity and traditions. Canada’s attempt to wipe out Aboriginal cultures failed. But it left an urgent need for reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. (TRC website, 2014)

Justice Murray Sinclair challenges all Canadians to know and respond to “How did we get to this point?” And, “What are we going to do about it?” This is a Canadian story and every single person deserves to be educated on this history and legacy. Reconciliation is working towards a new relationship. It is a national journey for healing and reconciliation.

Truth and Reconciliation and the Wahkotowin Report

Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools has embarked in a new relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, families, staff and communities. The need for the new relationship, referred to by Justice Murray Sinclair, is echoed in the Wahkotowin Report (2013). In effect, the outflowing of work from the Wahkotowin Report sets a path of healing and reconciliation in Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools.

Wahkotowin Report

In the Wahkotowin Report we listened and took action. It has challenged us to think how we can live in a way that “embodies Wahkotowin”. Throughout the 2013-2014 school year we have been continuing to listen, to learn, and to understand the impact of the direction we have taken. Simply restated, we constantly ask ourselves, “Are we making a difference?”