



*“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all”*

*~ Aristotle~*

# WAHKOHTOWIN NIKAHNOTE- RELATIONSHIPS MOVING FORWARD: FINAL DRAFT

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**Background:**

In 2013, Wetaskiwin Regional Public Schools endeavoured to connect with the First Nations, Metis and Inuit parent(s) and caregiver(s) that resulted in parent consultations. The intent of such parent consultations was to further explore the various ways in which WRPS could enhance the school experience for First Nations, Metis and Inuit students where the observable outcome would be higher levels of student success. From these parent consultations the Wahkohtowin Report 2013 was also compiled where it identified various findings and recommendations. The recommendations highlighted in the Wahkohtowin Report 2013 have since been implemented by WRPS. With the now implemented recommendations, WRPS has identified a need and importance in connecting back to the First Nation, Metis and Inuit school community to empower voice of parent(s)/caregiver(s) if WRPS is achieving its original intent as identified in the Wahkohtowin Report 2013.

**Acknowledgements:**

With Respect, I want to acknowledge the four Maskwacis Elders who opened in prayer and blessing of the research and storytelling of participatory parents/caregivers. Protocol was offered to each Elder of each member nation of Maskwacis where all four points were represented, the offering of protocol was accepted in kindness, respect and hope for our students of Wetaskiwin Regional Public School Division and in the spirit of relationship. The prayer was to serve as blessing for good intent, respectful encounters and quality outcome for the First Nation, Metis and Inuit Parent consultations and research findings that support our First Nation, Metis and Inuit student success in the long term. This writer further acknowledges all participatory parents and caregivers of the Wetaskiwin Public School community who were welcoming and sharing of their personal stories specific to the requested information. Hiy Hiy and thank you to our wise and kind Elders who laid blessing to this work and preliminary report and to all those that shared their stories. Nanaskomowin – Gratitude.

**Ceremony – Opening This Work of Parent/Caregiver Consultations**

In honouring the territory of the Maskwacis Cree people, Elders, parents, children and youth this writer acknowledges the strong connection to traditional ways, cultural practices and ceremonies that locate the Maskwacis Cree as a strong, resilient, and an empowered people(s) who value education for all their members. In the spirit of relationship building, honouring traditions and completing such work of inquiry. It is only appropriate that this research, data collection, interviews, community connection and the development/completion of preliminary document be opened and honoured through respective ceremony.

**Purpose – Wahkohtowin Nihkanote: Relationships Moving Forward**

In honoring the intent and purpose of the Wahkohtowin Report – First Nations Parent Consult 2013 this work was initiated to give parent/caregiver opportunity to have voice that acts as follow up to original parents consults of 2013. The purpose of parent/caregiver consultation was to find out if WRPS was indeed fulfilling original intent, purpose and identified recommendations as highlighted in the Wahkohtowin Report. These parent/caregiver consultations were conducted by way of a series of interviews with First Nations, Metis and Inuit parents and/or caregivers by returning back to the Maskwacis community, parents, caregivers and the Wetaskiwin Public School Division to address inquiry of the Wahkohtowin Report. This preliminary report is intended to inform Wetaskiwin Regional Public School Division of the parent/caregiver consultation findings that will inform response. It will also identify current progress, successes, and challenges as identified impacts for research participants and their students.

The Wetaskiwin Regional Public School Division sees great value and importance of listening and hearing the voices of the Maskwacis community, parents, youth, Wahkohtowin Liaisons and respective principals. Through the intentional, relational and responsive approach with the parent/caregiver consults, a welcoming space was created to engage with participants in order to bring their voices forward. Participants shared specific to their review, understanding of the Wahkohtowin Report which was guided by a series of specific questions that informed the question(s) of inquiry. While collecting such data it remained priority to ensure that all information and data collected was done in a culturally appropriate manner that was respectful,

one that honored the cultural practices and existing relationship of WRPS and the Maskwacis community, parents and youth.

## **Methodology**

An Indigenous methodology was utilized in this work of consultation. It is grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and understanding; which is most appropriate for this work of inquiry and consultation with the Maskwacis parents, caregivers and students.

An Indigenous methodology which was deployed, maintains a deep and abiding respect for Indigenous knowledges and experiences as one seeks out to gather answers in terms specific to the implications of introduced programs and in seeking data that informs the question of inquiry. The information collected was done so that was decolonizing in nature and relational in bringing forward the voices of parents, students and staff.

## **Methods**

The methods to gather specific information was done through various methods under an Indigenous framework and methodology. The following methods were used to collect data and supports further analysis to inform the question of inquiry.

1) Ceremony – Protocol(s)

2) In-Depth Interviews/Parent Consultations– one on one meeting with parents in their own communities and homes or as identified by the interviewee. For the purpose of this report the research method of in-depth interviews will be referenced as *parent consultation(s)*. Through contacting various families within the Wetaskiwin public school communities, parent consultations were scheduled where this writer attended to the family home to meet face to face

in their homes (parent consultation), scheduled telephone interviews/conversations at the request of parent/caregiver request and meeting at parent/requested location. i.e./community buildings.

3) Interview via telephone as identified by interviewee – questionnaire and discussion

The interview questions were developed to be respectful, open ended and supported conversation and allowed for parents/caregivers to share their story for this writer.

Through a generated list identified First Nations, Metis and Inuit parents/caregivers a random sampling occurred.

**Location:**

The parent consultations that were conducted were located within the Maskwacis, Pigeon Lake, Buck Lake, Wetaskiwin, Millet and Alder Flats community. Location(s) to be noted within a 100KM radius of Wetaskiwin. The location of such parent/caregiver consultations occurred in the participant homes, community building(s), telephone and as identified by parent/caregiver.

The locations were noted as safe, respectful and mindful of confidentiality of all participants. All encounters with parent(s)/caregiver(s) were scheduled and agreed upon by both the writer and parent/caregiver.

**Parent Consultation:**

With the parent/caregiver consultations, it was determined through reviewing the generated list provided by WRPS that there was approximately 250 family groups and of those groups the number of parents/caregivers contacted or attempted contact 125 of an estimated 250 family groups. 72 families were interviewed successfully, representing 25% of the family groups in WPRS.

*Note: Millet was noted to not be a Program School but caregivers reside in Millet where students attended school in Wetaskiwin where programming was offered.*

### **Question of Inquiry**

*With the implementation of changes in the Wetaskiwin Public School District as a result of the community engagement/Wahkohtowin Report that took place with the First Nations and Metis families, what have been the current impacts since implementation? What are the identified challenges? What are the identified successes?*

This writer developed a series of several smaller questions that elicited conversations, thought and greater opportunity parent/caregiver participants to share in the consultation. The developed questions are noted below:

- 1) Introduction-Rapport Building/Review of Wahkohtowin
- 2) When you reflect back over the last couple years with WRPS, what changes have you seen take place specific to First Nation and Metis programming in your child's school?
- 3) Do you think your child (ren) have benefited from the programs of WRPS (Wahkohtowin)? How and what ways do you think your children have benefitted?
- 4) With these program(s) implemented, has your child been met with any barriers and/or challenges? What does this look like?
- 5) As a parent have you been challenged or faced any barriers since the implementation of program(s)?
- 6) As a parent what have been your most successful or memorable moments when working with WRPS and the Wahkohtowin program?
- 7) What are some final thoughts or points that I can bring forward, both positive and concerning?

**Summary of Parent Caregiver Response/Themes:**

Through engaging in parent/caregiver conversations and introducing several questions to inform inquiry, this writer was able to establish and connect to several themes shared amongst parent/caregiver groups within the various schools. This writer has presented themes of information gathered and is noted below. This information is general and not specific to any one particular school, as being mindful not to identify school/parent(s)/caregiver(s). This summary includes preliminary findings and should be noted below to each category of themes:

***(1) Maskwacis Wahkohtowin Liaisons:***

The Maskwacis Wahkohtowin Liaisons provide services and support programming specific to First Nations, Metis and Inuit students and their parents/caregiver. The parent/caregiver response(s) to Maskwacis Wahkohtowin Liaisons is as follows:

- It has been shared with this writer that the role of the ‘MWL’ holds a valuable role within the school community as identified by interviewed participants. By maintaining such an invaluable role it has been reported that the support and direction that the ‘MWL’s’ offer students within the academic institutions of WRPS has contributed to students having a sense of belonging, connection to community and culture , successful transitioning to high school and familial supports.
- The parent(s)/caregiver(s) further reported that ‘their’ or ‘my’ ‘MWL’ provides frequent student updates, provides school program and activity updates where parents and caregivers report they are well informed with their child’s school and the going-ons of the school community.



- Parent(s)/caregiver(s) further reported that the ‘MWL’ provides liaise with the faculty staff of their child’s school. This liaise includes meeting support, reporting and coordination of parent/caregiver meetings but is also reported that they provide a venue and space for debrief and very brief counselling.
- Parent(s)/caregiver(s) have shared that the Maskwacis Wahkohtowin Liaison workers have also created and provide a ‘safe’ space for their children to come and ‘check in’. The parents and caregivers further reported that the ‘MWL’ in their child’s school supports cultural activities and teachings where their children are connected and exposed to culture. i.e./Cree language group, beading and drumming clubs, storytelling, and smudging. Parents and caregivers report their children’s learning is enhanced by such supports of ‘their’ ‘MWL’.
- Reported challenges and barriers are that parents/caregivers not aware who the ‘MWL’ is in their child’s school - reported there needs to be more contact and notification of changes and current ‘MWL’, ‘MWL’ needs and requires to support program with positive promotion
- That there is limited access and support of specified ‘MWL’
- Non Indigenous - Non Metis ‘MWL’ - parent and caregiver report that they will not or have not accessed as ‘MWL’ not identified from Maskwacis community or Indigenous/Metis.
- Parent and caregiver report that they would like to see ‘MWL’ take an inclusive approach that includes all students and not limited.
- ‘MWL’ fluent in Cree Language and speak language with children/youth to expose and teach.

- ‘MWL’ to maintain an exceptional level of professionalism and objectivity when working with families and students.

**(2) *Teaching Staff & Administrators:***

- Parents/caregivers report challenges and present as barrier of that being with administration staff of their student/child(s) school. They report that they would like to see teachers and principals participate in ‘training’ or ‘in-service’ that brings forward greater understanding and respect for the Indigenous Cree culture, past traumas that impact children today, territory and how to support the Indigenous school community where there is greater student attendance and academic success
- Further challenges reported is in reference to the administration staff within the schools, where parent(s)/caregiver(s) should be actively welcoming of all First Nation, Metis & Inuit students, parents and caregivers
- Encouraging student attendance at all grades but emphasize senior high importance
- Actively support First Nation, Metis & Inuit programming in the schools i.e./work with FNMI parents/caregivers for programming ideas, work cooperatively with Maskwacis resources
- Parent(s)/caregiver(s) shared successes within their school administration staff, that they feel supported and welcomed in their child’s/youth school by academic staff and principal
- Teacher(s) and principal(s) encourage and maintain communication to parents/caregivers in regards to students’ progress, transparency. The parent(s)/caregiver(s) appreciate identified practices.

- A success that was also noted was that parent(s)/caregiver(s) had access to the MWL as a resource and was observed to offer support to academic staff

***(3) Cree Language & Indigenous Curriculum:***

- Parent(s)/caregiver(s) report challenges in the area of Cree Language. They report that their child's exposure to Cree language is limited due to lack of programming, no Cree language instructor(s) and not actively supported by academic staff and principal.

\*\*Note: not identified at all schools.

- Successes reported are that parents/caregivers enjoy and have sense of pride that child is being exposed to their Cree language and culture through the school providing opportunity to do so.
- Parent(s)/Caregiver(s) appreciate and have a sense of pride knowing child is supported in learning Cree language. Recognize teachers who are also attempting to learn the language alongside their child.
- Challenges parent(s)/caregiver(s) share that there is limited or no access to have educational material for student(s) that covers information and knowledge on territory of Maskwacis and Treaty 6.
- That an all-inclusive approach is utilized with all students of WRPS when teaching Cree language and history to ensure all students of WRPS receive knowledge of treaty/territory/language to break systemic racism.
- Parent(s)/caregiver(s) report challenges such as not being made aware of any programs specific to Cree language.

- Junior/Senior school curriculum to include teachings specific to Alberta Indigenous history and current events.
- Utilize community elders for cultural teachings, i.e./rites of passage, bullying, kinship, values and beliefs
- Positive reporting where parents/caregivers see an increase in Cree language programming and view this as a benefit for child.

***(4) Cree Cultural Programming & Activities:***

- Parent(s)/caregiver(s) shared in success stories by noting that they appreciate that their child's school offers 'Cree club, beading club and drumming group'
- Sense of pride is achieved when child's school participates in cultural programming, i.e./school powwow, community guests, visual art/posters through the school and smudge room
- Proud that WRPS is recognizing a greater need to meet the needs of the First Nations, Metis & Inuit students, i.e./smudge room, programming, MWL's
- Reported challenges by parent(s)/caregiver(s) report that they would like to be informed of programming – proper notification
- To ensure that programming gives opportunity to welcome all students of WRPS
- To represent all four nations of Maskwacis with invitation to Elders to share in teaching/programming
- To have all WRPS schools mandated to actively participate in delivering Cree cultural programming and activities that is consistent with one another

- Parent(s)/Caregiver(s) further report challenges of academic staff not utilizing parent(s)/caregiver(s) for cultural knowledge when needed.

***(5) Student Success & Growth:***

- Parent(s)/Caregiver(s) report the following successes:
- that they are proud of academic staff and principal support to have students reach and complete graduation
- Most proud of cultural programming that supports student happiness, health and success in school
- Parent(s)/Caregiver(s) identified the following as challenges:
- They want students to graduate with diplomas and not be pushed to certificate for sake of graduating/gathering statistics by principal(s).
- To have and maintain transparency while following a supportive approach from academic staff and principal when dealing with child/youth with disabilities, i.e./ psych-educational assessments
- Support from academic staff and principals where students transitioning from ‘on-reserve’ curriculum are integrated in a positive and successful way into ‘off-reserve’ programming and curriculum.
- First Nations, Metis and Inuit student statistics to be available for viewing and WRPS support plan i.e./online availability.
- First Nations, Metis and Inuit students to have fundraising committee for FNMI student tours/activities.

**(6) Maskwacis Parent Council:**

- Parent(s)/Caregiver(s) share the following successes:
- Appreciate that there is a table for First Nations, Metis and Inuit parents to come together to discuss child's school experience(s), successes and challenges
- Parent(s) and caregiver(s) report that the Maskwacis parent council is much needed but also note that there is need for the following:
  - A sitting elder would be beneficial for this table
  - Require a newsletter to keep parent(s)/caregiver(s) informed
  - Sufficient notice and MWL support in contact parents to attend
  - Transparent and shared collection of agenda items i.e./ parent(s)/caregiver(s) having opportunity to bring forward agenda items
  - Not knowledgeable or aware of Maskwacis Parent Council and its mandate/terms of reference.
  - Parent(s) and caregiver(s) to bring forward fundraising 'sub-committee' at this table. To have fundraising opportunities for First Nations, Metis and Inuit students and programming.

**Additional Points:**

This writer noted from several First Nations, Metis and Inuit parent(s) and caregiver(s) that they identified their child (ren) not participating in Wahkohtowin programming. They identified no successes, challenges or points to bring forward in this report.

**Summary:**

In closing, this journey of parent and caregiver consults has been learning and knowledge building where respectful and relational conversations informed political, social and educational needs of the First Nations, Metis and Inuit students and their families. Our First Nations, Metis and Inuit parent(s) and caregiver(s) are so valuable in shaping success for our students of WRPS. The voices gathered in this report have provided invaluable information that will inform WRPS supporting student success through adequate programming and strengthening current relationships. Between WRPS and parent(s)/caregiver(s), there is a shared vision for First Nations, Metis and Inuit students that there is a sense of welcoming, belonging and recognition to the unique learning opportunities that FNMI students require which supports consistent growth and success in their academic journey with Wetaskiwin Regional District Schools. In moving forward, the voices brought forward in this report are shared amongst the FNMI parent(s) and caregiver(s), it is here that these shared voices empower and advocate for review and change of current programming of Wahkohtowin, curriculum enhancements which includes Indigenous knowledges, academic and principal attitudes/practices and an inclusive approach with all WRPS students which breaks away from stereotypes and racial microaggressions for all. First Nations, Metis and Inuit parent(s), caregiver(s) and students have a strong sense of pride in

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their unique culture, language and territory and this can enhance student experiences and chance for success. Nanaskomowin – Gratitude

**Appendices –**

Wahkotowin Report

<http://www.wrps.ab.ca/download/4723>