

ELDERS PROGRAM



Northern Lights School Division # 113
"Providing quality education for our children"

NLSD # 113 Elders Program



Elder knowledge is one of the most valuable resources in communities. One of the Elders' traditional roles is to pass on child and family development lessons of their cultural heritage. Historically teaching methods were taught through oral traditional story telling. Now with the rapidly depleting Elder population there is stress on the way families learn cultural traditions and practices. Many communities have little or no documentation on their cultural family practices. Fortunately, some communities have recognized this as a loss to cultural preservation and have begun to document their Nation's parenting practices and implement them into their community programs.
(Aboriginal Supported Child Development, 2009)

Introduction

The Elders play a very significant role in the lives and future of First Nation and Metis children in both formal and informal educational contexts. The Elders are important in First Nations and Metis cultures because of their wisdom and knowledge. They provide guidance in helping us to see the connections among our past, present and future. The Elders are the story tellers, which is an important aspect of our oral history. They provide guidance and assistance in teaching our children to live in balance and harmony within our world.

The Elders program is to compliment the work which is being done in schools. Every school in Northern Lights School Division # 113 has been involved in Elders programming locally. Each school has defined a program based on the needs of their community. Furthermore, each school has developed their program by accessing direction from community members and Elders.

It is important that an interdependent approach is used to address the needs of students. Together, the students, parents, teachers, administrators and Elders, along with the support staff and other community members, are an integral part of our service delivery in Northern Lights School Division # 113. It is this collective approach that will enhance and optimize educational opportunities for our students.

This document outlines the purpose, role, benefits and definition of Elders as presented by Northern Saskatchewan Elders in Cree, Michif, Dene and English.

Purpose

The purpose of the program is to maintain the practise that all schools within Northern Lights School Division # 113 have had incorporating the use of Elders. In the past, each school has developed their programs based on the local cultural norms, language and spiritual needs with direction from the Elders. The goal for this program is to provide support for the school based personnel to continue with their efforts in delivering an Elders program within their respective communities.

The Elders program will also function as a means to sustain the innovative and culturally affirming efforts of school personnel within Northern Lights School Division # 113. It will serve a two-fold purpose by reinforcing the roles and responsibilities of Elders within the schools and communities and by fostering respect towards Elders as knowledge keepers of language and culture.

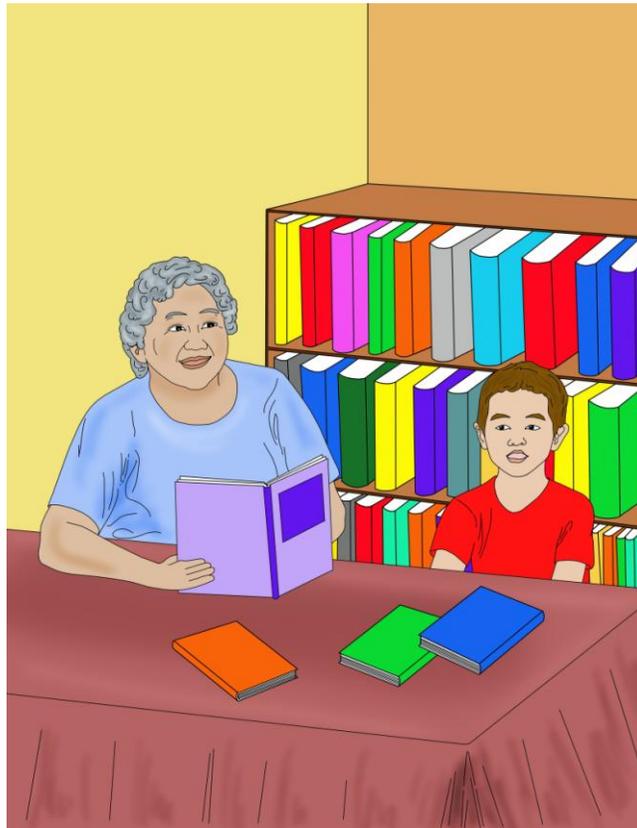
Procedure

Input from Elders was randomly selected from various communities within the Northern Lights School Division #113. They were interviewed and their responses were embedded throughout this document. Their participation was crucial to ensuring that the Elders program has a 'northern perspective', truly representative of the unique cultural norms, traditions and language of Northern Saskatchewan.

Some examples of school protocols and guidelines from various schools with Elders Programming within Northern Lights School Division # 113 were used as references. In addition, the guidelines were written with the support of informal interviews conducted with teachers, administrators and community members which were helpful for the development of this program.

Continuous Improvement Framework

The Continuous Improvement Framework outlines the need for both higher levels of achievement for First Nations and Metis students and equitable opportunities. The guidelines as outlined in this document can be used as a tool to assist students to gain higher levels of achievement and equitable opportunities. It can also be used at the school level to utilize Elders as a way of ensuring the attainment of student success.



A Time for Significant Leadership

A Time for Significant Leadership (2006) outlines four areas of recommendation in First Nations and Metis Education: Cultural Affirmation and School Climate, Shared Decision Making, Life Long Learning, and Core Curriculum Actualization. It is expected that the use of Elders in schools can help actualize the recommendations as suggested in the document titled Time for Significant Leadership.

First Nations and Metis Education

The Ministry of Education – First Nations and Metis Education Branch provided a presentation on First Nations and Metis Content, Perspectives and Ways of Knowing (2008) describing it as:

- holistic, lifelong, culturally responsive learning that allows students to reflect on their relationships with themselves, one another, and the natural world.

- commitment to improving achievement for all learners by providing equitable opportunities for all to succeed and contribute to society in a meaningful manner.
- coming from the teachings of Elders and traditional knowledge keepers who reveal First Nations and Metis worldviews as valid ways of knowing and understanding the world.
- incorporating First Nations and Metis Ways of Knowing as historical and contemporary cultures that are rooted in First Nations and Metis languages, and require the protection, revitalization and retention of languages in order to flourish and thrive.

It is these key expectations that are important when providing an educational experience to students within the Northern Lights School Division # 113. The Elders are a part of building capacity to actualize First Nations and Metis perspectives in education.

The Role of the Elders

The following is a summary of the role of the Elders within the Northern Lights School Division # 113 district:

- Teaching traditional and cultural skills at cultural camps such as trapping, fishing, beading, and storytelling.
- To provide a liaison between the school and community.
- To encourage the Non-First Nations and Metis staff to experience and accept the cultural traditions of the Cree, Dene and Metis people.
- Provide individual staff and student consultations upon request.
- To assist school staff and administrators on school policies in an advisory capacity.
- To assist classroom teachers with First Nations and Metis knowledge, language and traditional skills.
- Participating and instructing at Cultural days/week.
- Initiating and/or participating in interagency meetings.
- Assist with the preservation of traditional knowledge and oral tradition.
- Help to foster an atmosphere and environment of pride, respect and trust.
- Assist with the Northern Lights School Division # 113 initiatives such as Building a Community of Learners, 40 Developmental Assets, and other character building and social development programs in schools.
- To assist and support the First Nation and Metis language programs and curriculum development of language programs.

“Learning a second language promotes the ability to listen critically, to analyze, to reconstruct and to apply acquired knowledge to new situations, thus enhancing the development of problem-solving skills. When properly taught, it is the most effective medium by which one can acquire sensitivity to language. This in turn leads to an appreciation of the unique richness and unique limitations of one’s own language. Once a second language is learned, other languages are more accessible and more easily mastered.” (N – Grade 9 Nēhiyawēwin Curriculum Guide, 2003)

The Benefits of an Elder

Fostering Cultural Affirmation and School Climate

An Elder is a valuable resource person to assist the staff, students and community as a whole to better understand First Nations and Metis perspectives. They play an important role in assisting the classroom teachers with outcomes and indicators which have been written to make First Nations, Métis, and Inuit ways of knowing, knowledge, and perspectives foundational in the curriculum. This is a shift from the previous practise of merely incorporating First Nations and Metis content within the curriculum. The major benefit for all the schools is the increased awareness and support for local traditions, customs, languages, values and spirituality within the First Nations and Metis cultural settings. It is an additional benefit to the Non-First Nations and Metis cultures as it will provide opportunities to gain both an understanding and an appreciation of First Nations and Metis perspectives.

“Elders know about their history, pass on traditional skills for survival, without skills, you don’t know how to live in the bush.” (Moise Janvier, La Loche, Saskatchewan, 2009)



“It’s important for children to learn their language, parents, Elders, community people are responsible to teach children about Dene traditions.” (Ernestine Cheecham, La Loche, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“I am not only an Elder who guides our children; I am a learner as well. When my grandchildren come home from school, they teach me about what they are learning and I learn from them.” (Christie Crane, Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, 2009)

Building Relationships with Communities

Elders can be a liaison between the school and community where language and negative school experiences are barriers. They can bridge a gap to communicate positive messages regarding important initiatives happening in schools. They can provide advice and support in promoting and maintaining positive relationships within First Nations and Metis organizations.

Promote Positive Self Concept

Elders can play a significant role in impressing upon First Nations and Metis students that they should not be ashamed of their ancestry but rather to embrace their uniqueness and be proud of their identity and heritage. The history of Aboriginal peoples in education has not always been a pleasant memory for Aboriginal people. The progress in Aboriginal education since then has been liberating as many First Nations and Metis groups govern their own educational systems.

“As First Nations and Metis people we finally have a voice. The creator made us all equal. We can teach our young people to be proud of who they are as First Nations and Metis people and to teach balance and being equal amongst others. We need to honour our life journey and the life journey of others.” (Mary Lee, Elder, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, 2009)

Confronting Personal Issues

First Nations and Metis Elders are able to offer assistance to students and their families to address social and personal issues. Unresolved issues will impact the lives of students and their families and have a negative influence in their opportunities to learn and ability to function in a healthy manner. In collaboration with other staff, service providers and their families, Elders can assist to identify and resolve personal and family issues by providing support in developing a plan to address such issues.

“I am an Elder. I feel like I have wisdom to help children in anyway that I can. All would be lost if we didn’t have an Elder.” (Lena Boyd, Pinehouse, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“As an Elder, I talk to students about appropriate behavior, to respect each other, themselves, share with others and if they make a mistake, I tell them to deal with

it immediately, not to put it off for later, it will bother them for a long time.”
(Toby Janvier, La Loche, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“Elders can help with social issues, work with the younger people to talk about problems they might have and to live healthy.” (Helen Janvier, La Loche, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“When I talk to young people who have been in trouble with the law I tell them that something happened in their life journey. They have taken their own pain and inflicted it on others hoping that somehow their burden would become less. They hurt others to pay for their own hurt. I pray for those young people. Young people need to learn how to deal with that negative emotion in more positive ways. I talk a lot to them and don’t give up. They need to choose their way - it is up to them and when they do the Creator will guide them and fulfill their purpose.” (Mary Lee, Elder, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools, 2009)

Role Models

Elders are available to provide an example of a positive role model by offering their knowledge and sharing their experiences. They are the true ambassadors of their respective communities.

“Elders have experienced life in the past, been through hard times. They are treated with respect by the community.”
(Toby Janvier, La Loche, Saskatchewan, 2009)

Promoting Harmony

Elders are resource persons who can provide assistance in addressing negative stereotypes, discrimination and racism. Elders are examples of positive role models and can help the students and staff better understand First Nations and Metis perspectives.

“I like that we say the Lord’s Prayer in Cree every morning at our school.”
(Christie Crane, Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“Teachers need to be kind and use a calm voice when talking to students. I know by doing this it will do more for the kids.”
(Julia Daigneault, Buffalo Narrows, Saskatchewan, 2009)

Preserving History

The Elders are the keepers of knowledge. They have wonderful stories to share with others so that these stories can be passed on to future generations. Their teachings are messages on how to act, how to perform, and how to understand with the goal of maintaining First Nations and Metis culture in an effective coexistence with western culture.

“We got to teach them trust, respect and love and all these things. The way we

were brought up they got to learn. They (youth) deserve respect.”
(Emilien Natamogan, Pinehouse, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“I got all my knowledge from previous Elders. I was taught discipline from the Elders. When a young person was told to do something from the Elder, they would do it.” (Henry Roberts, La Ronge, Saskatchewan, 2009)



Preserving Language

Elders are truly the “Keepers of the Cree, Dene and Michif Languages” and serve as a resource for staff and students. Elder involvement provides an opportunity to interact in their first language of Cree, Dene or Michif. Classroom and First Nation and Metis language teachers are supported by the Elders in the delivery of First Nations and Metis languages. The use of Elders in the classroom promotes the learning aspects of Cree, Dene and Michif languages program delivery and enhances learning in all areas of literacy (speaking, reading, writing and listening). Elder involvement develops a positive self concept by building a strong base of cultural knowledge.

“Our children today do not understand Cree. You have to talk to them in English for them to understand. When I was a child we never did have English. It is good to have English in our schools. I think it would be good to also have Cree. We

should have both and not give up either.” (Marcel Fiddler, Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“We should teach half Cree and half English in school. They would follow curriculum but translate from English to Cree and Cree to English.” (Henry Roberts, La Ronge, Saskatchewan, 2009)

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1996) provided recommendations for retaining and increasing Aboriginal language use. Preserving and protecting First Nations and Metis languages means protecting the intended meaning of the spoken word as understood within the lived reality of the First Nations and Metis people – socially, emotionally, psychologically, physically, culturally and spiritually.

“The identity of a culture rests largely on a language among its people, because a shared understanding of certain words, gestures, and written symbols has the power to shape worldviews and to bind a group of individuals as one.” (The Heritage Community Foundation: Elder’s Voices, 2005)

Respecting First Nations and Metis Ways of Knowing

First Nations and Metis Ways of Knowing are valid ways of understanding and knowing the world. A Western knowledge system is a way of knowing that permeates the curriculum that is taught in schools today. The Elders are keepers of stories as told by their Elders and of how they understood the world and the interconnected relationship between language and place. The Elder gives an example of how a way of knowing has changed:

“There used to be a place that we called Kinosiw Sakahikan. Now today we know it as Foster Lake.” (Henry Roberts, La Ronge, Saskatchewan, 2009)

It is comments and stories shared with us from an Elders perspective that allows First Nations and Metis ways of knowing to be honoured and maintained. There are many examples of First Nations and Metis ways of knowing that are told by Elders in their Indigenous language. These ‘Ways of Knowing’ are embedded in Cree, Dene and Michif with the integrity of each story preserved in the respective language.

An example of these ways of knowing was shared in interviews with Elders revealing stories of ‘medicine walks’ with an Elder. This was when a younger person accompanied an Elder on a walk to gather herbs and roots to use for medicinal purposes. Many other examples are provided through stories from Elders.

Ways of knowing can be understood when Elders speak of stories they were told from their own Elders and passed on to others. There are resources referring to ways of knowing directly and indirectly written by scholars, historians and teachers who have recorded and quoted elders in published documents which can found online, in libraries, schools and tribal councils. Three examples of resources include authors Freda Ahenakew, NORTEP, and Meadow Lake Tribal Council (Appendix B).



Who is an Elder?

This can be defined in a number of different ways depending on the community. Typically, it is defined as someone in a First Nations and/or Metis Community who is recognized for their wisdom, knowledge, language and experience. An Elder acknowledges and accepts their role as an Elder as it relates to the community. Elders are individuals who share their teachings, experiences, language and guidance and offer support in fostering harmony.

Although the role of the Elder can be described in a number of different ways it is advisable to do some community research as to the local definition. Individuals tend to use age as a criteria and it is not always a suitable tool to use for identifying Elders within the community. The Elder may be a person who is involved in the community and offers their services by contributing to the community on an advisory and sharing capacity.

The following are some responses from Elders when they were asked to participate in developing guidelines to be used in identifying an Elder; as well as a perspective from students is included in Appendix A.

“An Elder is 55 and over. I was called upon by the mayor and council to help as an Elder. I would visit around the community and talk about school and church.”
(Emilien Natamogan, Pinehouse, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“As a young person I never heard the term ‘Elder’. I only understood what it meant in Cree – ‘Ketayak’. Now when they talk about Elders I know what they mean.” (Marcel Fiddler, Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“An Elder is past 50 years old, a good role model and stays at home and enjoys the company of grandchildren. And has a lot of wisdom.”
(Lena Boyd, Pinehouse, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“Elders are respected by local people, they are equal to others they know about the Dene traditional culture, they teach their children how to hunt, trap, fish and learn to survive on the land.” (Celina Janvier, La Loche, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“Some people think to be an Elder you have to be 55. Some of these Elders I hear say you have to be a grandparent or knowledgeable, wise and sometimes they pick those younger ones 45-50 years old.” (Henry Roberts, La Ronge, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“I was asked by Chief and Council to attend a meeting as an Elder that helped me recognize and accept my position as an Elder.” (Bertha McKay, Cumberland House, Saskatchewan, 2009)

Fostering a Welcoming Atmosphere for Elders at the School

As valuable members of the community Elders should be treated with respect when they visit the school. Community based staff members can be a resource for reviewing and knowing what guidelines to follow when Elders visit the school. The following are some general guidelines to follow when hosting an Elder at the school:

- At special events, Elders may or may not require a specially assigned helper but make a point of offering to assist them in any way (i.e., get them their food, something to drink; assist with setting up, etc.)
- If you are sitting, stand and welcome the Elder when he/she enters the room so that immediate gratitude and acknowledgement is modelled.
- Elders display a great amount of patience and thought. Do not expect immediate responses or continuous conversation. **W**
- Never interrupt or rush an Elder when he/she is speaking or performing an activity or ceremony.
- Some Elders are more comfortable speaking in their mother tongue when sharing and telling stories. You may want to provide a helper/interpreter for them.
- Always ask permission for clarification when necessary.
- Elders are there to provide a liaison between the school and community in an advisory role based on the community’s history and cultural practises.
- Elders can be given an offering or monetary gratuity as a gift for their service and support. One may research the acceptable practises of the community prior to approaching an Elder since each community has their own traditions and expectations.

- Each situation is different; do not presume that each situation is to be implied as being similar from a previous interaction.

“The best thing to welcome an Elder is to have tea and bannock – shaking hands would be good too.” (Emilien Natamogan, Pinehouse, Saskatchewan, 2009)

“It makes me feel good when students greet me and say ‘K’abí Nēz Sētsiyē’ (Good morning Grandpa), school staff know when I walk in the building, they greet me as well. That is good.” (Toby Janvier, La Loche, Saskatchewan, 2009)

Working with Elders

The protocol for approaching or accessing an Elder can be accomplished through contacting local school based staff or other community members. Community agencies/groups such as School Community Councils, First Nations Band offices, Friendship Centres or Town/Village offices may be able to provide the names of respected community Elders.

Consult with community members and/or school-based community staff members who may offer advice and direction with protocol in accessing the appropriate Elder for activities and events in and out of the classroom setting. For example, an Elder may be more knowledgeable about traditional outdoor activities, while another Elder may be more knowledgeable about the historical context of a community.

Elders in Residence

An Elder in Residence fulltime is an occurrence that has been observed in a school within Northern Lights School Division # 113. In this school, the Elder is utilized in a number of different ways including participating in interagency meetings, planning and coordinating cultural events, community and school events, coordinating Elders’ gatherings and youth conferences within the school, providing support in Cree language instruction, as well as other duties. The Elder’s role can be characterized as a community school worker and as such is identified this way in the Northern Lights School Division # 113 salary scale. At the same time his/her function can be described as an ‘Elder in Residence’.

If a school is contemplating employing an Elder full time then it should be carefully considered with input from a number of stakeholders in education.

Elders in Residence Programs or Elders programming exist within other Saskatchewan schools. A review of their role as an Elder within the schools shows them to be centered on the following themes:

- Providing personal counseling to students and staff
- Engaging parents
- Assisting with cultural activities
- Advising in areas of cultural traditions and ceremonies

- Offering spiritual guidance
- Involved in First Nations and Metis Language instruction and support



Elders Funding and Guidelines

The Northern Lights School Division # 113 has committed funds to the implementation of Elders in Residence and/or Elders Programming. Budget information is provided in Addendum A – Northern Lights School Division # 113 Staffing/Second Language/Community School Allocation. All of the school’s budgets allocations with the exception of the school decentralized budget are included in Addendum A. These allocations are provided to schools annually in the spring.

A portion of the Community School Budget is allocated to the Elders program as well as an additional allotment of Elders funding will be provided referred to as Community School Elders Budget. Additional funding for the Elders salary can be derived from our practice of ‘buying’ additional staff through FTE allocation and/or decentralized budget, normally FTE is allocated for instructional staff.

As an example to staff this position, a school can use their Community Schools Budget, Community Schools Elders Budget and their Decentralized School Budget to fund a position.

It is expected that Elders funding will be utilized for purposes outlined in the Elders program.

Conclusion

The Elders are the foundation in First Nations and Metis communities. This is based on their wisdom and knowledge of stories, cultural practices and First Nations and Metis languages. They are the pillars to language preservation, promoting and fostering positive and healthy lifestyles, and may offer leadership based on their experiences and life skills. The community Elders may offer their guidance in promoting and enhancing positive language and cultural experiences for students.

These guidelines are provided as examples to supplement the work of the communities and the schools. Elders' contributions are valuable as stated by a former resident of Northern Saskatchewan:

“Aboriginal Elders...can be tremendous human catalysts in the pursuit of culturally relevant and dynamic programs which are created in concert with the communities they serve. They can provide a voice that will enable schools to become more aware and responsive. Elders...can also facilitate meaningful community involvement in the school. When participation grows, communities develop a sense of belonging, which results in higher self esteem, higher academic achievement, and a lower transience rate.” (Monica Goulet, former First Nations and Metis Consultant, Saskatoon Public School Division).

Purpose, role, benefits of an Elder and defining an Elder are addressed by Elders from different communities in Northern Saskatchewan. Their perspectives and opinions are provided as a guide to demonstrate how to best utilize Elders in schools for the benefit of our children.

"It is recommended that: Elders be re-instated to an active role in the education of Aboriginal children and youth in educational systems under Aboriginal control and in provincial and territorial schools; Elders be treated as professionals and compensated for their education contribution at a rate and manner that shows respect for their expertise, unique knowledge and skills; and that Educational institutions facilitate opportunities for Elders to exchange traditional knowledge with one another and to share traditional knowledge with students and scholars, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal..."

Cooke-Dallin, B., Rosborough, T., & Underwood, L. (2000). The Role of Elders in Child and Youth Care Education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education* vol 24 no 2, pp82 - 91