

**Premier's Board of Education Award
for Innovation and Excellence in Education**

November, 2007

- I. School Division:** Saskatoon Public School Division No. 13
- II. Chairperson:** Mr. Ray Morrison
- III. Director of Education:** Dr. Jim Jutras
- IV. Program Nominated:** Okicīyapi Partnership

The following provides a brief description of the Okicīyapi Partnership. Additional information can be found at: <http://www.spsd.sk.ca>T

The Okicīyapi Partnership which is comprised of the Saskatoon Tribal Council (STC), Central Urban Métis Federation Incorporated (CUMFI) and Saskatoon Public Schools (SPS), is an innovative strategic alliance to promote, strengthen and facilitate First Nations and Métis (FNM) education in all of the Partnership's schools and communities. The Okicīyapi Partnership includes public schools in the city of Saskatoon and seven First Nation communities (Mistawasis, Kinistin, Muskeg Lake, Muskoday, One Arrow, Whitecap Dakota, and Yellowquill) in the Saskatoon Tribal Council area. The area extends north just past Blaine Lake and Leask (about 230 km), northeast to Birch Hills (about 150 km), and east to Archerwill and Tisdale (about 300 km), and south to Whitecap (45 km).

The Partnership, which formed in June 2003, has planned and implemented various innovative programs to meet seven key goals in the areas of employment, curriculum and cultural programming, language development, anti-racism education, cultural responsiveness, student success and partnership governance. Okicīyapi (a Dakota word given to the Partnership by Whitecap Dakota Elders), when translated means "working together for the better good" or common purpose. The mission of the Partnership is "together we create harmony." The goal is to work together to develop comprehensive programs that promote First Nations and Métis (FNM) education and success for all students.

"A vision without a task is a dream; a task without vision is drudgery; but a vision with a task can change the world."

Black Elk

V. Goals of the Okicīyapi Partnership

Employment: To create a representative workforce.

Innovations:

- Work collaboratively with Okicīyapi Partnership in matters concerning recruitment and retention of employees.
- Assist in the development of hiring practices to create and sustain a representative workforce. During 2007-2008 SPS will be delivering a workshop on Representative Workforce Interviewing skills. The workshop has two modules. One module is designed to assist Aboriginal candidates in their preparation for interviews and the second module is focused on administrators and supervisors who will be conducting interviews of Aboriginal candidates. First Nations and Métis Relations has funded this initiative.
- Recruit FNM staff through linkages with Aboriginal teacher education programs (SUNTEP; ITEP; First Nations University and attendance at career fairs)
- Ensure cross-cultural training opportunities for all employees.
- Partner with outside agencies to support student transitions to the workforce through training programs, mentorship, career guidance, etc.
- Present an annual orientation session to all new SPS employees.

Outcomes:

- Conducted an employment audit of SPS in 2004. Gains have been made towards a representative workforce with the hiring and retention of 30 new employees.
- Between 2004-2007 numerous cultural awareness sessions were provided to approximately 900 SPS employees.
- Aboriginal Employment Development Officer at SPS became sustainable with permanent funding.
- Supported Educational Assistant training program in 2006 for 23 adult students through a SIIT/CanSask Partnership.
- FNM education content, perspectives and resources embedded in SPS practices.

Curricula: To develop and implement sustainable Aboriginal curricula and cultural programming.

Innovations:

- Work with teachers to support the inclusion of FNM histories, knowledge and perspectives into curricula, and to identify specific needs required for curriculum actualization.
- Involve the Métis Education Worker in elementary schools.
- Plan and implement cultural awareness workshops for staff.
- Support promising practices in the areas of Literacy for Life, Collegiate Renewal, Indigenous ways of knowing, science, and mathematics.

- Support the inclusion of the Kākikē Ayamīcikē Literacy initiative in all seven STC schools.
- Share resources and build linkages between Partnership schools.

Outcomes:

- Creation of three Harmony resource binders with curriculum actualization materials from Kindergarten to Grade 12. These resources were developed through the guidance of Elders and the cooperation of educators in STC and SPS schools. Saskatchewan Learning has listed the Harmony binders as approved resources for use throughout the province. Also, this resource has been requested by outside agencies. Teacher candidates receive copies of the resource for use during their internships.
- Pilot the Traditional Knowledge Keepers' Project to support the inclusion of FNM content and perspectives in our schools. Traditional Knowledge Keepers are those people in the community respected for their cultural knowledge, gifts and talents but are not recognized as Elders. Numerous staff development workshops have been held to support teachers in infusing FNM content and perspectives into instruction in STC and SPS schools.
- Use of the Picture Word Inductive Model in all SPS and STC schools. All STC schools are now working collaboratively with SPS on improving literacy skills for our children and youth.
- Métis Culture Worker has supported learning in seven elementary schools over two years.

Language Development: To deliver a Nēhiyāwiwin Cree Language and Culture Kindergarten – Grade 3 Program.

Innovations:

- Develop and share Cree language materials for classroom use.
- Support the retention and revitalization of the Cree language by engaging Elders and community to support the Nēhiyāwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program. (See Appendix A)
- Assist in professional development opportunities to support and promote Cree language programs locally and provincially.
- Support family and community members in learning the Cree language.

Outcomes:

Enrolment

	2005-2006 (Sept30/05)	2006-2007 (Sept.30/06)	2007-2008 (Sept 30/07) *busing provided by Sask. Learning
Kindergarten	12	11	19
Grade One	NA	12	14
Grade Two	NA	NA	5

- Advisory committee formed to guide Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program.
- K-Grade 2 Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program implemented and expanding to Grade 3 in 2008-09.
- Cree language instruction made available for families of K-Grade 2 students.
- Provincial support secured for student transportation following Board advocacy.

Anti-Racism: To develop and implement comprehensive policies ensuring the eradication of racism in all our schools, at all levels.

Innovations:

- Conduct anti-racism workshops for students and staff.
- Review related administrative procedures with suggestions for revisions.

Outcomes:

- ACT*now* student leadership program delivered annually to 10 – 12 teachers and about 40 – 50 student leaders. Teacher training and student programs for 2007-2008 will occur in November and December.
- Work continues to ensure that the reporting of racial incidents is part of the formal bullying procedure in all SPS schools.

Cultural Resources: To create and support culturally responsive schools.

Innovations:

- Work with teachers to support the inclusion of FNM cultural understandings, world views, and ways of learning into the curriculum.
- Ensure the availability of Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers to support partnership initiatives. Provide First Nations and Métis cultural experiences (such as pow wows, round dances, feasts, Louis Riel Day, sweat lodge ceremonies, cultural camps, etc.).
- Provide support to all other partnership initiatives. On November 29th, 2007 the Okicīyapi Partnership is co-hosting a round dance with the Saskatchewan Indian Culture Centre.

- Research the development of the Alaskan Cultural Standards through an SPS Aboriginal Education Research Network (AERN) grant entitled, “Developing a Culturally Responsive School Division”.

UUUUUUUUUUOutcomes:

- Validating FNM content and perspectives enriching the learning environments for all students.
- Increase in awareness of FNM culture through educational experiences for SPS/STC/CUMFI staffs.
- In 2006, 39 students attended the three day Okicīyapi Culture Camp that included overnight stays in tipis. In 2007 an Okicīyapi Culture Camp and a Traditional Knowledge Keepers’ Culture Camp were planned. These events were well attended with 504 students participating.
- Okicīyapi Partnership Community Feast and Round Dance, March 23, 2007.
- Annual Elders’ Forums and increased involvement of Elders in classrooms provide opportunities to respect their wisdom and ways of knowing and facilitates transfer of knowledge to the next generation.
- Waokiye (Traditional Helper) who acts a cultural advisor was supported with permanent funding through SPS.
- Willingness to share findings from research, inservices, Elders’ Forums and community consultations with Partnership organizations.
- Participation of Okicīyapi Partnership staff with SPS staff in research trip to Fairbanks, Alaska to research the development of the Alaskan Cultural Standards. Two SPS schools are presently conducting action research in this area.

Student Success: To develop supportive mechanisms to ensure the success of all students.

Innovations:

- Support the Collegiate Renewal and Literacy for Life learning priorities.
- Gather and interpret data on student achievement with the goal to improve student outcomes.
- Liaise with stakeholders (parents, school personnel, government, and community agencies) to provide wrap-around support for students and parents.
- Expand the SPS Literacy for Life initiative to include Kākikē Ayamīcikē Literacy initiative with seven STC schools.
- Provide math inservices and Make and Take workshops to interested STC schools.
- Provide professional development opportunities to support the inclusion of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 Harmony binders.
- Conduct a literature review into promising practices that support students in their various transitions and helps them develop positive attachments to schools.
- Design and implement a Student Success Coach model that supports positive student transitions (home to school, rural to urban, elementary to secondary, secondary to post-secondary or workforce).

- Evaluate Partnership effectiveness in supporting student learning outcomes.

Outcomes:

- Improved transitions between STC/SPS schools through two student tracking workshops held for SPS/STC staff. Contact information for STC schools has been added to SPS' directory to facilitate communication.
- Research completed on Student Success model and a high school chosen for piloting this innovation.
- 12 staff trained in Saskatchewan Learning's, "*A Time for Significant Leadership*" Part One Module.
- Learning Leader Facilitator: FNIM Education supported with permanent funding through SPS.
- FNM perspectives supported through Collegiate Renewal and Literacy for Life Strategic Committee involvement of Partnership staff and invitations to support further Partnership dialogue in ways to improve student learning outcomes.
- Site visits to Edmonton schools identified as exemplars of promising practices in the area of FNM Education.
- SPS instructional consultants provided inservices on effective math instruction and assessment strategies to teachers at Muskoday and Muskeg Lake First Nations.
- SPS instructional consultants provided Make and Take workshops to teachers in SPS schools and teachers from Mistawasis, Muskoday and Whitecap Dakota First Nations.
- Project Leader: Research and Innovation will submit a report as of June 30, 2008 to Saskatchewan Learning on the Okiciyapi Partnership's effectiveness in supporting student learning outcomes.

Governance: To develop and maintain a respectful and equitable co-governance structure and process for the operation of the Partnership.

Innovations:

- Implement governance structure of Education Council and its Working Group (See Appendix B).
- Develop annual and five year strategic plans.
- Develop brochures and speak at conferences highlighting Partnership initiatives.
- Plan and conduct community engagement forums.
- Coordinate teacher/administrator exchanges between partner schools.
- Develop, implement and evaluate mechanisms for sharing of services, professional development opportunities, information (student tracking) and resources (curriculum materials; Circles of Science) between partners.
- Conduct research and report promising practice results from AERN projects including student stability rates, cultural responsiveness, and specific literature reviews.
- Share expertise on learning priorities: Literacy for Life and Collegiate Renewal.
- Strengthen our partnerships with agencies such as the Canadian Council on Learning (CCL); Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (ALKC); Aboriginal Education Research Centre (AERC) and the Saskatchewan Indian Culture Centre (SICC).

Outcomes:

- Co-governance model developed and implemented with a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2003 and a renewed Memorandum of Understanding (now including CUMFI) signed in June, 2006. (See Appendix C)
- Multi-year strategic and annual operational plans.
- Increased engagement of community in forums and consultations (Stay In School Community Forum April, 2007).
- Staff exchanges between SPS and STC schools – 17 visits in 2006-2007. Plans are in place to continue this initiative in 2007-2008.
- SPS instructional consultants supporting learning priorities (literacy and math) with STC schools. Teachers working collaboratively on the Circles of Science initiative.
- Aboriginal Education Research Network Grants - research and reporting Partnership effectiveness.
- Okicīyapi Partnership received CCL's *Sharing the Flame* National Award in June, 2007 for Best Practices in the Area of Aboriginal Education.

VI. Brief Description of How the Okicīyapi Partnership Addresses the Award Criteria

1. Board involvement/influence/participation in the innovation

Saskatoon Public Schools has two trustee members on the Okicīyapi Partnership Education Council that is part of the Partnership governance structure.

Foundational to the funding commitment with Saskatchewan Learning is a requirement for boards to maintain programming initiated by the Okicīyapi Partnership. In each of the last three annual budgets, SPS' Board has provided sustainable funding for:

- full time position for an Aboriginal Employment Development Officer in the Human Resources Department.
- funding to expand the Nēhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program to include K- Gr. 2 programming. Financial commitment includes teacher and educational assistants' salaries, resources and interim transportation for students until provincial funding was secured.
- funding for the *ACTnow* anti-racism teacher and student training programs.
- full time position for a cultural advisor. With Board support SPS has a Waokiye (Traditional Helper) on staff.
- full time position for a Learning Leader Facilitator for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Education.
- funding for site visits to Edmonton schools identified as exemplars in the area of FNM education.
- funding to support training for Saskatchewan Learning's staff development module, "A Time For Significant Leadership" for 12 staff members.

The Board has also demonstrated their support for Partnership initiatives through their participation in Elders' Forums, Culture Camps, Traditional Knowledge Keepers' camps, ACT*now* anti-racism camps, and our first annual Feast and Round dance.

The Board has requested two planning and development sessions with members of the Okicīyapi Partnership in order to provide ongoing support for the Partnership's strategic work.

The Board has identified Partnership initiatives as Celebrating Excellence items. These items are showcased at the Board's public meetings.

The Board's work plan for 2007-2008 includes a commitment to strengthening relationships with FNM communities. The Board had identified FNM Education as an area for Board development during this school year.

2. Innovative nature of the program

One promising practice identified in K-12 school systems is partnerships between school divisions and First Nations and Métis peoples. Saskatchewan Learning published a policy framework in 2003, *Building Partnerships: First Nations and Métis Peoples and the Provincial Education System*, which paved the way for authentic partnerships between school divisions and First Nations and Métis peoples in Saskatchewan. The goal of working in partnership with First Nations and Métis peoples and their governments is to provide the best possible supports to all children and youth in our schools.

The Okicīyapi Partnership is providing leadership as one of the first partnerships of this kind in Saskatchewan that directly links a large urban school district with a First Nation Tribal Council and also with a Métis within the community of Saskatoon. The Okicīyapi Partnership includes public schools in the city of Saskatoon and seven First Nation communities (Mistawasis, Kinistin, Muskeg Lake, Muskoday, One Arrow, Whitecap Dakota, and Yellowquill) within the Saskatoon Tribal Council. The area extends north just past Blaine Lake and Leask (about 230 km), north-east to Birch Hills (about 150 km), and east to Archerwill and Tisdale (about 300 km), and south to Whitecap (45 km).

The work of the Partnership is achieved through a Memorandum of Understanding and the creation of a representative co-governance structure comprised of an Education Council and a Working Group.

This Partnership is also one of the first to provide a collaborative, comprehensive response to improve learning outcomes for First Nations, Inuit and Métis students. The Partnership's core goal is to foster the development of innovations that are responsive to needs of students, parents, and communities. This is illustrated in the innovations listed above. The Partnership also provides a meaningful way to authentically and respectfully engage FNM partners in educational decision-making.

3. Sustainability of the innovation

In 2006 an Aboriginal Research Education Network grant was approved to study the Okicīyapi Partnership. This collaborative research study, “*Building School Climate through Shared Governance*” (Lafond, 2006) found evidence of the following positive changes:

- Success in working toward the attainment of their goals as evidenced in the listing of current benefits accrued by the Partnership, and the potential benefits they perceive can be attained.
- The nature of the benefits attained revealed that they were best attained through a collaborative framework.

The effective practice of the collaborative governance was evident in the Partnership as reported by Lafond’s assessment of the implementation of Austin’s (The Collaboration Challenge: How Nonprofit and Businesses Succeed Through Strategic Alliances, 2000) seven C’s of an excellent partnership:

- **Connection with Purpose and People**
 - People closely connected with the Partnership understand the purpose and the importance of relationship building.
- **Clarity of Purpose**
 - Persons closely involved with the Partnership have clarity of purpose.
- **Congruency of Mission, Strategy and Values**
 - There is congruent concern for the well being of all students served by the partners.
- **Creation of Value**
 - Resources (people, knowledge, skills and experiences) are recognized, valued, acknowledged and shared in the process of building culturally responsive communities.
- **Communication between Partners**
 - Where relationship building has been nurtured, trust and respect exist.
- **Continual Learning**
 - The Partnership values a co-governance model where learning is inclusive and respectful.
- **Commitment to Partnership**
 - Commitment to Partnership is high among senior administrators.
 - The challenge is to “grow the commitment” within all stakeholders.

The development of the Okicīyapi Partnership’s five year strategic plan, created and approved by all stakeholders, acknowledges the long term commitment to the Partnership. Funding from Saskatchewan Learning was initially approved for three years, but has been extended into the fifth year. This demonstrates Saskatchewan Learning’s ongoing support for the vision, goals, co-governance model and successes of the Partnership. Saskatoon Public Schools has provided financial support for the sustainability of this innovative partnership through the addition of three permanent staff positions.

4. Cost of the innovation related to the benefits achieved

“The Saskatoon Public School Division envisions a learning community that is caring, committed to celebrating diversity, and respected for its focus on learning. We believe we can create a future in which students eagerly embrace learning. We believe that learning has the power to build confidence and inspire hope.”

(SPS Vision statement)

The Saskatoon Tribal Council has seven schools with over 900 students and 100 professional and support staff. The Central Urban Métis Federation Incorporated represents the Métis community of Saskatoon through its mandate to provide equal economic, social and educational opportunities for Métis people. Saskatoon Public Schools is one of the two largest school divisions in the province with 44 elementary and 10 secondary schools that serve approximately 20,000 students, and employ over 2,400 professional and support staff. When parents, other family members and community agencies are included the number of people impacted by the Partnership is quite extensive.

The Okicīyapi Partnership has received local, provincial, and federal funding for the last five years. The following funding bodies have supported and continue to support the Partnership: Saskatoon Public Schools, Saskatchewan Learning (First Nation and Métis Branch), Canadian Council on Learning, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Saskatchewan First Nations and Métis Government Relations. Numerous employees have been provided with opportunities to participate in cultural awareness training and cultural celebrations. During this time the SPS Board has added 3.0 sustainable positions through their budget process. In June, 2007 the Okicīyapi Partnership was selected through a national adjudicated process to be a Best Practice in the Area of Aboriginal Education.

Future research studies will focus on the impact that the Partnership has on student learning outcomes. What is known is that First Nations and Métis students continue to be “over-represented among those not succeeding in or completing school” (Building Partnership: First Nations and Métis Peoples and the Provincial Education System: Saskatchewan Learning, 2003). The Okicīyapi Partnership, through its seven goals, attempts to address systemic barriers to Aboriginal student success. It is imperative that our young and growing Aboriginal population receive the supports they need to be successful in school and to be contributing citizens in our communities, our province and our nation. Realized benefits support the investment in the Okicīyapi Partnership. As these successful innovations are championed by boards such as the Saskatoon Board of Education who has provided sustainable funding, there are benefits for today’s children and youth as well as anticipated benefits for future generations.

It is important that the costs and benefits of the Okicīyapi Partnership are viewed from a holistic perspective grounded in the relationships that have been nurtured over the past five years. Within the Okicīyapi Partnership, Elders, parents, educators and community members are valued and their role is honoured in improving student learning.

5. Client support for the innovation

There is a wide range of stakeholders involved within the Okicīyapi Partnership including:

- Students
- Parents, Elders, and other family or community members
- Staff (teachers, administrators, support staff, Partnership employees)
- Saskatoon Tribal Council and related Band Councils
- Central Urban Métis Federation Incorporated
- Saskatoon Board of Education; Saskatoon Public Schools
- Funding bodies: Saskatchewan Learning (First Nation and Métis Branch), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, First Nations and Métis Relations.

Client support for the Okicīyapi Partnership is best expressed through the following testimonials:

From Parents of the Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture program

I was excited when I heard about the program. I grew up speaking Cree but have lost it. I want my son to understand and appreciate Cree language and culture.

She can talk to kokum and mooshum.

I am overwhelmed and happy with the Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture program. I lost my Native tongue.

Parent teacher interviews brought tears because of putting the language to use.

Our Elders talked about us losing our language. This gives us hope of not losing our language.

In June, 2004 Harry Lafond (then Education Director with Muskeg Lake Cree Nation) proposed the idea of a Cree language and culture program at an Education Council Meeting. Dr. Jim Jutras, Director, Saskatoon Public Schools worked with the SPS Board of Education to respond to that identified need. In August, 2005 the Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture program was established at Confederation Park Community School. That program has expanded from a kindergarten program of 12 students in kindergarten to 38 students in K- Grade 2. The goal is to expand the program to include Grade 3 in 2008-2009.

Student Success Coach

“A key priority in the Mount Royal Collegiate school planning document is cultural responsiveness. We are very grateful to the Okicīyapi Partnership for supporting Mount Royal by providing the funding for our Student Success Coach. Mr. Okihcihtaw, our Student Success Coach, works with students, staff and parent/guardians towards providing a safe, supportive and culturally responsive learning environment for all of our students.”

Dean Newton

Saskatoon Public Schools, Principal
Education Council Representatives

“The Okiciyapi Partnership’s goals and values align with our organization’s vision and mission statements. Together we are better as we work to improve the learning outcomes for our students as they transition between their home communities and Saskatoon Public Schools.”

Val Harper
Saskatoon Tribal Council, Director of Education

“The Okiciyapi Partnership strengthens our desire for the inclusion of Aboriginal content in all of our schools. This Partnership is unique and is a powerful voice for our people.”

Shirley Isbister
Central Urban Métis Federation Inc., President

“The Okiciyapi Partnership is a good venue for Aboriginal people to advocate for and to support the inclusion of Aboriginal content and perspectives in our schools.”

Doreen Day-Wapass
Saskatoon Board of Education, Trustee

“The Okiciyapi Partnership gives the partners the opportunity to be aware of and support the changes needed to ensure our entire student body reaches their potential both academically and socially.”

Shannon Underwood
Saskatoon Board of Education, Trustee

6. Evidence of improved student achievement

The Kākikē Ayamīcikē Program is a direct result of collaboration between SPS and STC. Through the Okiciyapi Partnership these organizations have worked together to improve learning outcomes for all students. As STC staff learned about SPS’s literacy initiative from Okiciyapi Partnership staff a decision was made to apply to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) for a grant to support the Kākikē Ayamīcikē literacy initiative. A grant was received from INAC and in 2006-2007 three schools participated with SPS in staff development opportunities that focused on the Picture Word Inductive Model. Throughout that inaugural year learning successes were shared by STC teachers, administrators, Director of Education and various Education Councils and in 2007-2008 all seven schools are now participating.

In 2006-2007 SPS reported the following Literacy for Life results:

Kindergarten

- In May 2007, 83% of kindergarten students knew 20-26 lower case letters while only 7% knew 10 or fewer lower case letters.
- At the beginning of the May 2007, kindergarten students, on average, knew 63% of the words being studied through the Picture Word Inductive Model.
- In May of 2007 (as assessed by the Gunning Procedure) two-thirds (66%) of Saskatoon Public Schools sampled kindergarten students were reading at the

Picture/Caption level, and another 29% were at the Easy Sight and above level.

Grade One

- By May, approximately 98% of Saskatoon Public Schools' grade one students knew 20-26 lower case letters.
- At the beginning of the May 2007, grade one students, on average, knew 87% of the words being studied through the Picture Word Inductive Model.
- Our May 2007 data from the Gray Oral Reading Test showed that, on average, Grade 1 students are reading at approximately 2.0 GLE. This means our students were reading, on average, at national norms for this grade level.

Grade Two

- In 2006-2007 (using the Gray Oral Reading Test as a testing protocol), the mean score for Saskatoon Public Schools' Grade 2 students tested in March 2007 was 3.0 grade level equivalents (GLE). A typical score for testing with the GORT at this time of year is 2.7 GLE. Based on students' rates of growth as of March 2007, an estimate of their scores at the end of June was approximately 3.3 GLE. In other words, it was as if Saskatoon Public Schools' Grade 2 students had received three extra months of instruction.

Data regarding STC results are unavailable but the Okiciyapi Partnership team believes that the opportunity exists for similar learning benefits for their students as documented in the following teacher testimonials:

“I am finding the Picture Word Inductive Model (PWIM) to be a great addition to our Language Arts program. The training we received through the Saskatoon Public School Board helped us understand and implement PWIM in our classrooms.”

Kimberly Hodgson
Grade One Teacher
Yellow Quill School

“I appreciated that there were teachers working together for a common goal with a shared experience; there were people to ask questions and share solutions. I felt very comfortable and welcomed by the people of Saskatoon Public Schools.”

Kim Reid
Whitecap Elementary school
Whitecap Dakota First Nation

Saskatoon Public Schools have two schools that are presently involved in research towards becoming more culturally responsive. Other schools have made Aboriginal Education a learning priority in their strategic plans. These actions have been possible because of the Partnership's work in the areas of curricular supports (Harmony binders, Traditional Knowledge Keepers, Metis Culture worker, *ACTnow* and Circles of Science) and cultural opportunities (sweatlodge ceremonies and feasts, pow wows, culture camps, round dance, and Elders' Forums). The Nêhiyâwiwin Cree Language and Culture Program has expanded from a Kindergarten program to include instruction in Grades One

and Two. Enrolment has grown with the availability of free city-wide transportation. Support for the program is summarized in the articles included in Appendix A. Working relationships between educators in SPS and STC schools have been strengthened through joint workshops (student tracking, Harmony binder professional development, Literacy for Life and Kākikē Ayamīcikē literacy initiative, ACT*now* inservice, math workshops/make and takes and educator exchanges). The literature review on student success models has been shared within the Partnership. While only eight months into the pilot, feedback on this initiative has been encouraging. It appears to be a promising practice that helps students make positive attachments to their schools by supporting them during their transitions. It is the belief of members of the Okicīyapi Partnership that all of the initiatives described above contribute in some way to improve student achievement. As students transition between SPS and STC schools they now benefit from powerful and familiar learning strategies, effective staff development and collaborative cultures within the Partnership.

VII. Concluding Remarks

The Saskatoon Tribal Council, Central Urban Métis Federation Inc. and Saskatoon Public Schools are committed to working together through the Okicīyapi Partnership to improve learning outcomes for all students. The Saskatoon Board of Education has been very instrumental in the success, to date, of the Okicīyapi Partnership. From the very beginning strong relationships were built based on shared core values and a mission statement that stated, “together we create harmony.” With the initial signing of a Memorandum of Understanding in 2003 and a renewed Memorandum of Understanding in 2006, the Saskatoon Board of Education is firmly committed to the core purpose of the Partnership which is to develop a strategic and responsive alliance that promotes, strengthens and facilitates First Nations and Métis education in partner schools and communities. This innovative partnership is unique in that it brings together organizations that have different mandates but share an understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing our Aboriginal students. These partners were brought together by a community forum that identified specific concerns that required a multi-agency response. Through the key goals of creating a representative workforce, developing and implementing sustainable Aboriginal curricula and cultural programming, Cree language and culture programming, anti-racism education, cultural responsiveness, student success and partnership governance the Partnership is working to improve learning outcomes for all students.

The Saskatoon Board of Education has demonstrated their commitment to the Okicīyapi Partnership through trustee involvement in the co-governance model and through their financial commitments to supporting Partnership innovations in a sustainable way. In closing, Saskatoon Public Schools has valued the opportunity over the last five years to work collaboratively through this co-governance partnership. Together the partners work to ensure that all children receive a high quality education in culturally responsive learning environments that prepares them to become caring and contributing citizens.

Okiciyapi Partnership

***"Those Working Together For A
Cause"***

Appendix A



Nêhiyâwiwin

Cree Language & Culture Program

KINDERGARTEN AND GRADE ONE

**ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A LANGUAGE RICH
CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT FOR YOUR CHILD TO
LEARN THE "Y" DIALECT CREE LANGUAGE?**

**THE NÊHIYÂWIWIN CREE LANGUAGE AND
CULTURE PROGRAM AT CONFEDERATION
PARK COMMUNITY SCHOOL IS NOW
ACCEPTING APPLICATION FORMS FOR
THE 2006-2007 SCHOOL YEAR.**

**APPLICATION FORMS AVAILABLE AT:
NEIGHBORHOOD ELEMENTARY
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

**SASKATOON TRIBAL COUNCIL
SUITE 200-335 PACKHAM AVE.**

**SASKATOON PUBLIC SCHOOLS
MAIN OFFICE 310-21ST STREET EAST**

**PLEASE FORWARD COMPLETED FORMS
TO CONFEDERATION PARK
COMMUNITY SCHOOL.**

**CONFEDERATION PARK COMMUNITY SCHOOL
3555 JOHN A. MACDONALD ROAD
SASKATOON, SK. S7L 4R9
683-7180 OR FAX 657-3909**

**THE CREE KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM
IS MORNING ONLY.**

**CONTACT FLORA BINNING FOR FURTHER
INFORMATION AT 683-8310 OR FAX 657-3972**

Immersion unlocks language for Cree students

COMMENTARY

It's Wednesday morning, and Karen Rabbitskin's Grade 1 class is practising phonics, 11 students all talking at once.

In a classroom without desks, they sit at tables arranged in a U-shape, five of them seated along one side, six on the other. Rabbitskin stands at the front. She holds an open book and points to a line of block letters.

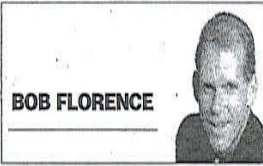
Together the students pronounce the different sounds, their voices rising as they go along in the way kids do.

"Ah, ow, ay, ew . . ." they say, speaking in Cree.

Cree immersion is a bright idea that was introduced in Saskatoon two years ago with a group of 13 kindergarten kids at Confederation Park School.

Coupled with the Grade 1 class added last September, there are now 23 students enrolled in the program. The numbers will multiply again in the fall when a Grade 2 class joins the lineup.

Rabbitskin dreams of a day when there is not just a class, but a whole school in the city dedicated to the teaching of everything Cree. She envisions



students from K to 12 learning the language and drumming up the history and maintaining the Cree traditions.

But that's for another day. Today, she has 11 Grade 1 students on the go.

After the class finishes the group phonics lesson, Rabbitskin gets one of her students, a boy named Ceejay, to stand up and recite the sounds on his own.

For all but two of the students, Cree is a new language. Growing up in the city, immersed in urban life, most of them speak only English.

Ceejay, the story goes, was visiting his grandparents at their home on the reserve during Christmas, when, drawing on lessons he'd learned in class, he and his grandfather started talking together in Cree. They had never done that before.

"Sometimes they just amaze me," Rabbitskin said later, when her class was in the schoolyard at recess. "I hear them using words I've barely intro-

duced and this is high-level Cree, some words are 15, 18 letters long.

"They know how important the language is. They understand why they need it. They're like sponges. 'Give me more.'"

Rabbitskin has been a teacher for 20 years. Although her experience was working with higher grades — she taught at the middle school level — she was at the top of the most-wanted list when administrators went looking for someone to lead this new project.

Harry Lafond, education director with the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, proposed the idea of a Cree immersion program. Jim Jutras, director of Saskatoon Public Schools, endorsed it. That was June 2004.

In the fall of 2005 the door to Rabbitskin's classroom at Confederation Park School opened.

"The No. 1 concern of parents was that by having their kids in this program they were going to miss out on (conventional) learning opportunities," said Cort Dogniez, co-ordinator of First Nations and Metis education with Saskatoon Public Schools. "English is all around us. They're not going to miss out there. These students aren't losing English,

"Hearing the kids talking, seeing our language saved and revived, it makes me want to cry. I feel so good."

—Teacher Karen Rabbitskin

they're gaining another language."

Donna Partridge says the gains go beyond language.

"It's an identity," she said.

Partridge enrolled her son, Emmanuel, in the immersion program. She has lived in the city for 10 years and has two older children, age 12 and 15, who are growing up fluent in English, but fractured in Cree.

"That's my fault," she said. "I don't speak it enough at home."

For Emmanuel, she wants a reconnection.

"It's important for him," she said. "For us."

Not only has Partridge bought into the immersion program, she's now helping deliver it. She works with Rabbitskin as

a teacher's assistant.

On this morning Partridge leads the kindergarten class, her group on the other side of the room from the first graders. In the middle of the room is a big tipi.

Throughout the room are pictures and symbols of Cree culture.

Some of the curriculum is adapted from a program in Onion Lake, much of it is what Rabbitskin has developed on her own.

Rabbitskin said one of her upcoming lessons was going to be about legends.

"I'll tell them the story about the big bear and the little bear and the stars," she said. "I'll tell them where the story originated.

"We teach songs, rhymes, prayers. And humour. There's a lot of humour in Cree."

Classes in Cree are offered at three high schools in Saskatoon. Dogniez says this program goes beyond that. More than learning the language, this is about preserving a culture.

Said Rabbitskin: "Hearing the kids talking, seeing our language saved and revived, it makes me want to cry.

"I feel so good."

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Our Children ... Our Schools ... Our Future

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Saskatchewan
Learning

The spirit of learning: Cree language program for kids

For nearly thirty years, the provincial government has supported a French Immersion program so that Saskatchewan school children could work towards fluency in French. Now, administered by the First Nations and Métis Education Branch, the Government of Saskatchewan has begun to develop an immersion project in Aboriginal languages, too.

The Nehiyawiw Cree Language and Culture Program is a first-of-its-kind Aboriginal language immersion program for Saskatchewan schools. It was initially offered at the Kindergarten level last year. Now in its second year at Confederation Park Community School in Saskatoon, the Nehiyawiw program, which means the spirit or essence of being Cree, seeks to give First Nations children, as well as non-Aboriginal children, the foundation for an Aboriginal language education. The program also helps students understand Aboriginal customs and traditions, build self-esteem and supports students who already have an understanding of Cree to become more fluent.

This school year, the program at Confederation Park Community School has been expanded to cover Kindergarten-to-Grade 1, and it will ultimately be extended to Grade 3 students in two years (2008/09). This will allow the children who began the program in its inaugural year, as well as all subsequent students, an opportunity to complete four consecutive years of Cree language and culture education.

While the Cree Language Program is targeted largely to First Nations and Métis children, with close to 90 per cent of the program curriculum delivered in Cree, children of all cultural backgrounds are welcome to enroll in the program.

Dr. Jayne Hudson is the principal at Confederation Park Community School in Saskatoon. Along with program teacher Carolyn Rabbitskin, Hudson coordinates the Cree Language Program at Confederation Park and says the program aims for the personal as well as cultural enrichment of

the children who enroll.

"At the end of Grade 3, children will graduate the Nehiyawiw Cree Language and Culture Program with basic Cree language skills and an understanding of Cree customs and traditions," Hudson said.

"Language reflects culture and defines a people, so for First Nations children, they will acquire that important connection to their traditions and heritage, while non-First Nations children learn to understand and appreciate another culture and language. By all accounts, the program is a hit with the children," Hudson said.

"I visited the classroom and it is incredible to see the language that the little ones picked up over the year," said Ted Amendt, Superintendent with First Nations and Metis Education. "It's obvious to see through their enthusiasm and attention to task that they understand the program is something personally important to them."

Teacher Carolyn Rabbitskin has made similar observations. While she remarked that at first the children may approach the new language with confusion, they quickly begin to absorb it. "At first, the students compare English and Cree and struggle with understanding why there is a difference, but fairly quickly they move to accept Cree for what it is and then they become quite enthusiastic. They become like little sponges," she said.

As the number of First Nations and Métis students in Saskatchewan schools continues to increase, programming such as the Nehiyawiw Cree Language and Culture Program and other First Nations and Métis content in the provincial curriculum will help students benefit more from their learning experiences.

The Nehiyawiw Cree Language and Culture Program represents an important step by the provincial government towards promoting the revitalization and retention of Aboriginal languages in Saskatchewan.

— Saskatchewan Learning

Partnership Governance



- The Partnership is operated by the Education Council.
- The Working Group will be assigned tasks by the Partnership Education Council.

Signing of Renewed Memorandum of Understanding in June, 2006

Isabelle Impey
Elder

Dan Danielson
SPS Board Chair

Shirley Isbister
CUMFI

Elwyn Bear
STC





SPS Central Office Staff Cross Cultural Awareness Training