

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum



Elders

## Welcoming Elders

Excerpt from *Our Words, Our Ways*



Government of Alberta ■





## WELCOMING ELDERS

Excerpt from *Our Words, Our Ways*

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### WELCOMING ELDERS

Elders are men and women regarded as the keepers and teachers of an Aboriginal nation's oral tradition and knowledge. Age is not considered a determinant of wisdom; young people of sixteen years may have essential knowledge. Different Elders hold different gifts. Their contributions to schools and classrooms can be significant when they are involved in meaningful ways such as bringing traditional ceremonies and teachings into the school or classroom; providing advice to parents, students, teachers and school administrators; providing accurate information about Aboriginal heritage and Aboriginal communities; and acting as a bridge between the school and the community.

Elders are considered vital to the survival of Aboriginal cultures and the transmission of cultural knowledge is an essential part of the preservation and promotion of cultural traditions and their protocols. Elders are always to be treated with great respect and honour.

The roles of Elders vary greatly from community to community, as do the protocols and traditions they teach. Elders can be spiritual guides, healers, medicine men and women, artists, seers and counsellors. Elders often perform such services as:

- giving prayers before meetings
- describing or performing traditional ceremonies
- sharing traditional knowledge
- giving spiritual advice to individuals
- demonstrating traditional crafts and practices
- teaching the community's protocols.
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The wisdom of Elders can be divided into two types: spiritual advice and traditional knowledge. According to Elders' teachings, spiritual advice is the teachings of prayers to the Creator for personal well-being or ceremonial activities. Traditional knowledge has to do with knowing how to live in a way that is respectful to Mother Earth.

It is important to make Elders welcome by following protocol or a code of etiquette appropriate to the customs of the people or community. *In Alberta, each Aboriginal community has its own cultural and social traditions that translate into protocols that should be carefully followed.* Although regional and tribe-specific protocols have evolved over time, there are many similarities and common themes that are important to remember.

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Using proper protocol means following the customs of the people or community. As protocol varies between communities and individuals, it is important to ask an informed community member about the protocol that needs to be followed. Generally, people respect those who care enough to ask.

**Principal story**

**Elder in the school**

“In the past, if there was a problem, we would set up a meeting with a counsellor or a community agency for our Aboriginal families and more often than not, the family would choose not to take that route with the problem. When we began working with an Elder, we saw a distinct change in the families’ response— they would attend meetings where the Elder would be present, and often, the Elder’s parenting circle as well. As an added benefit, students regularly seek out our Elder to talk about personal issues.”

**Liaison story**

**Elders’ support**

“We had an escalating situation with one high school student. The school’s administrators had reached their limit and called in the parents. Having heard their son’s side of the story, the parents were extremely angry with the school. There didn’t seem to be much of a chance of resolving anything, everyone was so upset. So we requested the help of two Elders, a man and a woman, to mediate at a meeting between the administrators, the student and the parents. They met in a conference room rather than the administrator’s office. They sat in a talking circle, not across a desk from each other. Everyone’s attitude began to shift when they heard the other person’s side of the story. This process had a lasting effect—the student is still struggling with school but because he’s stopped challenging authority, he’s finding the support he needs.”

**Approaching an Elder**

The best way to contact an Elder and learn the protocols to follow is to ask contacts in the community, such as Aboriginal liaisons in the school system, parents or Friendship Centre staff. Community members will be able to provide the names of respected Elders.

For a list of Aboriginal organizations and agencies that can advise schools on choosing and working with local Elders, see *Appendix 8: Aboriginal Organizations and Agencies*.

These community members can help teachers determine which Elders would be appropriate visitors to the school or classroom. For example, one Elder might have significant knowledge of a ceremony, while other Elders might be knowledgeable about the history of the community or a traditional skill.

Aboriginal people believe that if you want to know something, you must be willing to sit with someone who has the knowledge. Be aware that when you approach an Elder, you must be patient.



Other potential topics for Elder presentations include:

- kinship
- role modelling
- parenting
- importance of education
- planning for the future.

When approaching a First Nations or Métis Elder, protocol *usually* requires the offering of tobacco, a sacred traditional plant that is used to open the door to consult with Elders. An Aboriginal liaison or Elder’s helper can provide the necessary guidance when determining when tobacco is necessary. Consider the following guidelines when offering tobacco to an Elder.

- When the Elder indicates that he or she is ready and introductions have been made, state your request in a respectful way. Be clear, open and honest, and speak plainly. For example,  
    “We would be honoured if you would give a prayer at our next meeting.”  
    “I would be honoured to benefit from your advice and guidance.”  
    “We would be honoured if you would visit our class to share your knowledge on ...”

It is also important for the Elder to understand what kind of guidance you are requesting: spiritual advice or traditional knowledge.

- If the Elder accepts the tobacco from you, he or she is accepting your invitation or request. The tobacco will then be offered to the Creator during a prayer for life and good health.

If the Elder declines the tobacco, he or she is declining your invitation or request. The Elder may have prior commitments or be unable to help you. Ask your community contact for clarification.

### **Hosting Elders in the classroom**

Elders are respected community members and should be treated well. Elders are very humble and do not ask for anything, but they are usually busy people, and the gift of time and wisdom they bring needs to be valued. Consider the following guidelines for hosting an Elder in the classroom.

Ensure that transportation, accommodation and meals are taken care of, either by providing them or by giving an honorarium to cover expenses. Sometimes an Elder may need to be driven to an event. If an Elder brings a helper, their costs should be covered, as well.

- Prepare the students for the visit from the Elder by reviewing good listening practices and manners such as avoiding eye contact and not asking inappropriate questions. Explain the importance of the Elder’s role in the community and the value of his or her knowledge.
- Invite the Elder to the school to meet informally with the students and staff before he or she visits the class so that the Elder can become familiar with and comfortable in the school environment.
- While the Elder is visiting the class:

## **WELCOMING ELDERS cont.**

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***Walking Together***

- ensure that the students listen politely and are helpful and welcoming to the Elder
- have one of the students show the Elder around the class, the Elder’s sitting area and where to find the washroom
- have breaks during which the Elder can relax in another room if the visit is a long one
- always supervise the students’ interaction with the Elder to ensure that he or she is treated with respect and courtesy
- provide a light lunch or snack for the Elder, such as tea, bannock and jam. Protocol usually requires that Elders are served first, followed by the students, followed by others.

### **Thanking an Elder**

At the end of the visit, thank the Elder formally with a handshake and have the students express their appreciation for the visit. Present the Elder with a gift such as a blanket, towel set, slippers or socks, and encourage the students to present a class gift, such as a food basket containing preserves, cheese, crackers, fruit, bannock and cans of soup. This exchange of gifts is an honoured tradition arising out of the principle of reciprocity.