

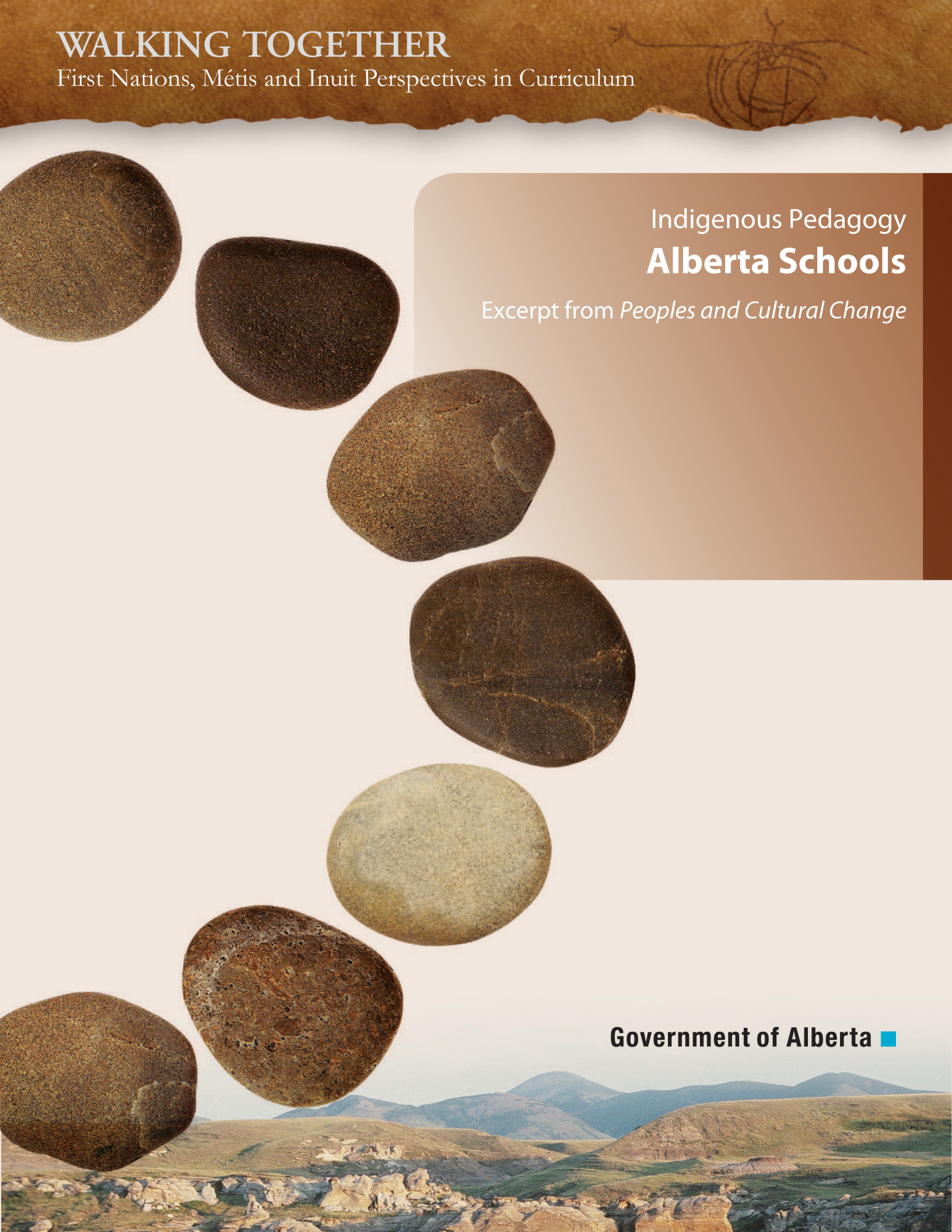
WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

Indigenous Pedagogy **Alberta Schools**

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

Government of Alberta ■





ALBERTA SCHOOLS

Excerpt from *Peoples and Cultural Change*

ALBERTA SCHOOLS

Aboriginal students in Alberta have more choices concerning their education now than they did in the past. In this section you will read about two post-secondary options designed especially for Aboriginal students: Blue Quills First Nations College and Red Crow Community College. Then you will read profiles of four Alberta schools that are uniquely Aboriginal: Amiskwaciy Academy, an urban Aboriginal high school; Kainai High School, a First Nations-operated reserve school; Father R. Perin School, a northern elementary school; and the Elizabeth Community School, a Métis Settlement school.

As you read, consider the impact these schools and programs have on cultural continuity for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples.

Blue Quills First Nations College

Blue Quills First Nations College (BQFNC) occupies 100 hectares of reserve land near St. Paul, Alberta. Founded in the 1930s, the campus housed a residential school for First Nations children. In 1971, local First Nations took over the school and the college now stands proudly as one of the first post-secondary, First Nations-run education centres in Canada.

BQFNC offers programs for learners from all cultures in a unique First Nations environment. Teachers are sensitive to the First Nations learners' culture, values, ancestral knowledge, and traditions. The educational philosophy is grounded in *nehiyaw mamitonihičikan* — Cree for “First Nations thought” — and it offers access to leading edge research and knowledge from *moniyaw mamitonihičikan*, “European academic thought.” At BQFNC, First Nations culture permeates the teaching philosophy, distinguishing the college from mainstream educational settings. These are examples of the unique ways the college promotes pride in First Nations culture:

- Accredited courses in First Nations languages and studies are offered.
- Students are invited to participate in ceremonies led by Elders.
- Faculty from local First Nations communities offer students their unique perspectives and talents.
- The college has an Elder on staff and a sweat lodge, and it holds cultural events on site.

Red Crow Community College

Red Crow Community College (RCCC) was founded as an adult education centre on the Kainai reserve near Cardston, Alberta, in 1986. It initially provided limited high school and post-secondary education to students of the Kainai Nation. Under the guidance of Marie Smallface

Marule, the college grew rapidly and in March 1995 became the first college in Canada run by a single First Nation.

Today the college offers diploma and degree programs in partnership with Mount Royal College in Calgary and the University of Lethbridge. RCCC offers unique opportunities to Aboriginal learners. For example, the Kainai Community Learning Partnership Program focuses on providing the Kainai community with training to qualify for employment and further education. Kainai adults who have been unemployed or on social assistance can take life-skills training, such as how to carry out a job search. Another example is the Niitsitapi Teacher Education program, which prepares students to teach Blackfoot language and culture in elementary and high schools.

The college also offers a Diploma in Kainai Studies. This unique program explores the history, language, and social foundations of the Blackfoot Confederacy. University-trained educators and traditional Elders from the community make for a unique educational environment that embraces the Kainai learner.

Amiskwaciy Academy

Amiskwaciy Academy is western Canada's first urban Aboriginal high school. The name comes from the Cree word for "Beaver Hills House," — *amiskwaciwâskahikan*, the name Cree people used for Fort Edmonton. By taking this name, the school honours both Edmonton's history and the meaningful role First Nations people played in that history. Amiskwaciy Academy was conceived in a partnership between the Edmonton Public School Board and the Alberta government, and it was developed in consultation with Elders and the Aboriginal community. It was opened as a pilot project in 2000, to better meet the educational needs of Aboriginal students living in an urban environment. The school welcomes all students who have a desire to understand the values, traditions, and cultures of Aboriginal peoples.

Students who attend the Academy enjoy an innovative mix of programming that includes Aboriginal events, options, and personal guidance. Although the school uses the provincial curriculum as a framework, all subjects revolve around Aboriginal models and experiences. For example, in social studies, teachers focus on the contributions that Aboriginal communities have made and continue to make to Canadian society. In art, students focus on Aboriginal artists, both traditional and contemporary. The program is enriched by option courses such as Cree language and Aboriginal dance.

Students benefit from the wisdom and teaching of Aboriginal Elders through an Elder-in-Residence program.

A work program builds partnerships with post-secondary institutions and businesses, encouraging students to gain work experience and job placements. A mentoring program pairs business leaders with students.

Students also have access to tutors provided by the University of Alberta School of Native Studies. The tutors are Aboriginal students studying at the university.

Amiskwaciy Academy considers spirituality a vital part of creating a supportive learning environment. Innovative elements such as ceremonies and prayers are an integral part of the program. Amiskwaciy Academy integrates spiritual ceremonies throughout the school year and encourages students to explore and reclaim their Aboriginal spirituality. Smudging and morning

prayers start the school day. Teachers use guided imagery to help students focus on their studies. Sweat Lodge ceremonies are provided for students and staff. All these programs are intended to equip the student with a better appreciation of the past, teach them to learn in the present, and help them reach their potential in the future.

Kainai High School

Kainai High School combines the inherited traditions of the First Nations world with the modern world. While exposing its students to modern technology and information, it also immerses them in the rituals and cultural customs of their First Nation, binding students to their community and ensuring that students walk away with a sense of accountability and responsibility.

The Kainai Nation of southern Alberta, a community of approximately 9000 people, is home to Kainai High School. Located near Standoff, Alberta, the building was originally a residential school. Kainai High School graduated its first high school class in 1961.

Kainai High School came under the control of the Kainai people in 1988. Today the school is a technologically advanced institution. The school has about 300 students, most of whom are from the Kainai reserve. All are Aboriginal.

Students study core provincial curriculum in Grades Nine to Twelve, but they are also offered a variety of culturally centred, community focused programs and services. Career and technology-based studies are also offered.

The school takes special pride in its drama program. Some of its full-scale productions have been presented locally and nationally. The school's acting troupe has performed at the Assembly of First Nations conference in Calgary, Alberta, and it has participated in the Provincial Drama Festival in Red Deer, Alberta.

Kainai High School's Registered Apprenticeship Program gives students who wish to learn a trade a head start by placing them as interns with local companies while they are still in school.

For students needing support, the *Aisiimohki* — Blackfoot for "Counselling and Healing" — Program offers support and guidance for students. Members of the community, parents, drug and alcohol counsellors, the Department of Health, and the Department of Children's Services all work together in a communal approach to support students.

The First Nations worldview embraces two distinct yet inseparable worlds: the natural world and the spirit world. Both find their place at Kainai High School in the Elders' Mentor Program. Teachers look to the wisdom of Kainai Elders to guide students and help them stay balanced. Elders teach the rich heritage of the oral tradition, counsel students, and perform spiritual ceremonies.

Father R. Perin School

Founded in the 1950s by a Catholic priest, Father R. Perin School is located in the beautiful rural setting of Janvier, Alberta, southeast of Fort McMurray next to the Chipewyan Prairie reserve. Originally housed in a portable building, a permanent, contemporary facility was opened in 1986. The school is equipped with all the modern amenities and state-of-the-art technologies necessary to help its students excel academically. Educating children from Kindergarten through Grade Nine, Father R. Perin School includes a diverse student body of about 100, about two-

thirds of whom are First Nations. The remaining third are Métis and non-Aboriginal students. The faculty comes from all over Canada, while support staff are hired from local communities.

Part of the Northland School Division, the school provides compulsory First Nations culture and language classes taught by Aboriginal instructors. Teachers rely on advice from local Elders. In the morning before classes start, extra-curricular activities and tutorials are offered. Most students voluntarily participate in these programs, including sports, drama, study time, and tutoring.

In the past, the school struggled with chronic attendance problems, sometimes with more than 60 per cent of the students missing classes. In an effort to change this, a progressive and unconventional program, Family Friday, was introduced. Every second Friday students have the entire day off, allowing them to spend the day with their families. As well as giving families needed quality time together, it also allows them to attend appointments and other commitments. Attendance has improved significantly.

At the end of every February, you can find the Father R. Perin School celebrating their Winter Carnival. Bringing together the efforts of students, faculty, family, and community, the day is spent participating in various fun events, sports, and other activities.

To answer the needs of the community, the school offers breakfast, snack, and hot lunch programs in partnership with local businesses. Father R. Perin School was one of the first in Alberta to offer a hot lunch program for all students. The program recognizes the importance of meeting the physical needs of its students to help them reach their full potential.

Elizabeth Community School

Located on the Elizabeth Métis Settlement in Alberta, the Elizabeth Community School joined the Northland School Division in May 1989. Beyond offering the core instruction necessary to educate its students from kindergarten to Grade Eight, the school sets itself apart by offering innovative and creative activities designed to ignite a love of learning.

All 110 or so students are Métis and live on the Elizabeth Métis Settlement. Class sizes average fourteen students, allowing teachers to customize the curriculum and spend time with each student.

Drawing on its strong Métis cultural and historical connection, the school runs a fiddle program. The program teaches its students not only to play the instrument, but also to connect with an important part of their ancestral past through music.

Most students in the community have some Cree ancestry or Cree relatives on surrounding reserves. To inspire an appreciation of local First Nations culture, Cree language instruction is available.

Each year, Elizabeth Community School holds a week long Artists in Residency Program. Four members of the Trickster Theatre company — a Calgary group that offers school theatre workshops — visit and assist students and staff in creating, practising, and delivering a performance for the entire community.

To encourage attendance, staff created the Attendance Initiative. Being present and on time every day for a week earns students a ticket to a draw for gifts donated by local businesses. In 2004, one teacher, in an effort to motivate her students to work as a team and achieve an impressive attendance record, promised to allow the kids to shave her head if as a whole class

they were present and on time for sixty days out of the school year. Another bonus is the Pizza Program. If a student attends all classes and has arrived on time for a month, they win a free pizza lunch. Some students have received a free pizza lunch every month for the entire school year. These programs, though unorthodox, act as positive reinforcements for the students to attend school.

Teachers and staff take their positions seriously. They believe their efforts motivate students academically, creatively, and spiritually. “It’s great when our kids are eager about school,” says Grade Two teacher and Elizabeth Settlement community member Laurie Collins. “I get excited when I can see students learning. It is important to be a role model for our students so they can see that a First Nations person can make it as a school teacher or anything else they want to be.”