

# WALKING TOGETHER

First Nations, Métis and Inuit Perspectives in Curriculum

## Kinship School, Family and Community

Excerpt from *Our Words, Our Ways*

Government of Alberta ■





## **SCHOOL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY**

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## **SCHOOL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY**

### **Resolving differences**

If parents become frustrated, be careful not to minimize their concerns, argue or become defensive. In many Aboriginal cultures, those who display their tempers lose respect. Consider the following strategies.

- Let parents know that what they say is important.
- Write down the concerns or suggestions of parents.
- Ask parents to clarify if the concerns are too general.
- Work on solutions together. Write them down.

### **Parent advocacy**

Advocacy means speaking out and taking positive action to make a situation better. For example, Aboriginal parents may want to advocate for extra help for their child in school, for building on their child's special interests or for culturally relevant approaches to instruction or to discipline. This can be a challenge for some Aboriginal parents who may not feel comfortable in a school environment.

Depending on their experience, some parents may be unsure of how to advocate on their children's behalf. Some parents also may be reluctant to do so because they may not want to interfere in what they see as the school's business. They may also want to avoid conflict or feel that they will not be listened to.

Parents need to know how advocacy will help their child. They need to see teachers modelling this process.

If the school has an Aboriginal liaison, it might be appropriate to involve the liaison in the advocacy process. To help parents become more effective advocates for their children, consider the following strategies.

- Before contacting other teachers, school staff and professionals on a student's behalf, consult with the student's parents and seek their advice and support.
- Include parents in preparations for meetings. Share information and ask for their input on agendas and who should be invited to meetings.

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This excerpt on school and community ©Alberta Education. *Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners*. Edmonton, AB, 2005, pp. 66–77 and 167.



- Model appropriate language when talking to parents about their child’s learning concerns. Model the collaborative “win-win” attitude of successful advocates.
- Involve parents in meetings with other teachers and consultants. Encourage them to observe the process of collaboration and problem solving with others.
- Commend parents for their efforts at advocacy.
- Share information with parents such as the following suggestions that Aboriginal parents share in the Alberta Education resource, *A Handbook for Aboriginal Parents of Children with Special Needs* (2000).

### Shared wisdom

Aboriginal parents offer advice to other parents.

- Come to the school—the school belongs to your child. Visit your child’s school anytime throughout the school year. At the beginning of the year, ask your child’s teacher how to make arrangements to visit the classroom.
- Let your voice be heard by the teacher and, if need be, by the administration. If you have a concern, continue to speak up, as it is the only way positive changes will happen.
- Ask to sit in on classes to see what is happening.
- Talk with other parents who have children in the class.
- Look for local parent support groups and find out about other resources.
- Get to know the teacher by name and make sure he or she knows how to contact you.
- Tell the teacher how you may be contacted if you don’t have a phone.
- Make an appointment with the teacher to discuss any specific concerns. Make arrangements to telephone or write a letter if you are unable to meet.
- Ask that the teacher, principal, liaison worker or school counsellor meet with you in your home if you would feel more comfortable meeting there.
- Read the school newsletters, as they often contain valuable information that concerns your child.
- Become familiar with the school’s policies and procedures about attendance, discipline and other issues.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions.
- Go to all parent-teacher conferences.
- Keep all school information in one place so it’s handy for meetings at the school or when seeing others in the community about your child.
- Volunteer to share a craft or special skill from your culture.

Adapted from Alberta Learning, *A Handbook for Aboriginal Parents of Children with Special Needs*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Learning, 2000, pp. 30–31.





## Liaison Workers

A number of school districts are finding that liaison workers, employed at either the district or school level, can be important sources of information and support for Aboriginal students and their families.

### Principal story

#### Role of the liaison worker

“I had a lot to learn as a new principal. Although as a teacher, I always enjoyed positive relationships with the families of my Aboriginal students, I was finding it more difficult to reach parents in my new role as administrator. In retrospect, I guess I really didn’t understand how truly negative many of the families felt toward anything to do with school and education. A principal represents authority for some people, and for some Aboriginal parents, this can stir up many negative memories of their own personal experience with schooling. At the beginning of the school year, I was having difficulty getting parents to return my phone calls or meet with me. Connie, the Aboriginal liaison worker at the school, really helped me build my knowledge base and learn the community protocol that first year. She also shared background information about families with me. This helped me develop a better understanding of not only the kinds of challenges these families faced but also the strengths and gifts these families had. She offered me, and other teachers on staff, practical ideas for making sure our Aboriginal families feel welcome at the school. She would often pave the way for us by meeting informally with a family before we phoned them or asked them to come for a meeting.

With her guidance, the staff also began to do more home visits and use talking circles for meetings. As a liaison worker, Connie had many roles in the school. In addition to coordinating cultural events, she organized a number of low-key opportunities for parents to come into the school, such as coffee mornings and beading classes. This really helped create a new comfort level for many of the parents. This informal socializing also gave her opportunities to talk one-on one with parents, and by doing this, she found out what was going on in their lives and then was better able to offer support and advice.

The whole community valued the preventive work she did on behalf of our students. Using her excellent connections in the community, she was able to help a number of families put much-needed supports into place before problems escalated into full-blown crisis situations. The number of families in the school needing formal Child Welfare involvement dropped significantly after her first year on staff.

Connie also developed strong relationships with individual students. In our annual school survey, Aboriginal students consistently identified Connie’s most important role as being ‘someone at school who really understands and cares about me.’”

Job descriptions for liaison workers across the province vary, but they often include the following types of responsibilities:

- establishing and maintaining a trusting relationship with Aboriginal students and their families
- acting as a communication link between home and school to assist with school-related issues
- meeting with individual students on a regular basis to find out what these students need
- connecting with Aboriginal organizations and community services so they can refer and connect students and families to the community resources they need



- providing assistance to teachers for presentations related to Aboriginal cultures, issues and languages
- organizing cultural events and activities for the school community.

Liaison workers can help increase the involvement of Aboriginal families in their children's education and can reduce the effects of discrimination and racism for these students. The efforts of liaison workers can contribute to improved student attendance, achievement, self-confidence and decision making. Having a liaison worker in the school can also promote the development and implementation of appropriate cultural and educational services for Aboriginal students.

### **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.

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.

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:
  - 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.

### **Welcoming Community Members**

Invite guests from the Aboriginal community to the school and classroom to take part as guest speakers, performers, resource people and volunteers. Aboriginal business people, visual and performing artists, professionals, traditional teachers, athletes, storytellers and others have much to offer that will enrich programming and support cultural continuity. Consider the following guidelines when hosting Aboriginal members of the community.

- Ask contacts in the community such as liaison workers, parents and Friendship Centres to help contact appropriate visitors and to help with appropriate protocol.
- Understand that it takes time to learn about Aboriginal communities and their members. It takes time to build networks, understand the community dynamics, and honour the customs and traditions they practise.
- Take time to build a relationship with prospective guests. Invite them to visit informally or be prepared to visit them.
- Honour the principle of reciprocity when guests have completed their visits by offering an honorarium and/or a small gift of appreciation.

Welcoming the community into the classroom increases the effectiveness of teaching practices and, as a result, accountability to Aboriginal students.

#### **Teacher story** **Shared teachings**

“A traditional teacher visited our class of students with behavioural challenges and brought his teachings about the drum. Students who normally wouldn’t have been able to focus for more than five minutes sat still and gave this teacher their undivided attention for half an hour. He was teaching about something that mattered to them.”

Protocols are codes of etiquette that describe appropriate and respectful behaviour and ways of communicating when working with or visiting Aboriginal communities. Using proper protocols





means following the customs of the people or community you are working with. Understanding and following protocols can bring about meaningful conversations that are relevant to the people involved.

Each Aboriginal community has its own protocols. Protocols can change in a community without notification, for example, when a new chief and council are elected. Protocols also change depending on whether the situation is informal or formal.

Some examples of situations that involve protocols include:

- giving tobacco (Cree) or blankets or towels (Inuit) to an Elder when seeking their knowledge or counsel
- contacting the council and explaining your intentions before visiting an Aboriginal community
- opening or closing a meeting with a prayer.

By following protocols, teachers can:

- build trusting, honest relationships
- show respect for Aboriginal cultures, values and beliefs
- allow people to speak in the voice and style of their cultural group
- create balance in the consultation and negotiation process
- improve relationships with Aboriginal communities.

### **Understanding protocols**

When working with an Aboriginal community, it is important to understand what is important to the people who live there. When following protocols, teachers need to keep in mind the following Aboriginal beliefs and values.

- **Respect**  
Get to know the community members, and understand and honour their protocols, expectations and unique qualities without stereotyping.
- **Diversity**  
There are similarities and differences within and between Aboriginal communities, related to languages, cultures and traditions.
- **Oral traditions**  
Personal contact and dialogue are extremely important.
- **Time**  
It takes time to learn about Aboriginal communities and their members.
- **History**



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Western cultures have played a role in shaping Aboriginal communities in the past and present.

- **Humility**

Treat each person as an equal. Titles and positions, such as teachers and school administrators, may not be considered authoritative positions in a community.

- **Family**

Family, extended family and community obligations have a higher priority than business and other concerns.

### **Arranging a Visit to an Aboriginal Community**

When arranging to visit an Aboriginal community, consider the following guidelines.

- Find someone who can guide you, such as an Aboriginal liaison worker, cultural advisor or another member of the community, such as a parent or teacher. Consider whether you will be covering topics that are gender-specific during your visit. If so, you should choose a female guide for female topics and a male guide for male topics.

If you do not know anyone who can help, look on the Web site of the department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for a community profile. Scan the community profile for the name of an organization that has a successful working relationship with the community, and contact them for advice and information about the community dynamics.

- Educate yourself on the structure, history, protocols, values and beliefs of the Aboriginal community you will be visiting. Write down any questions you have. Your guide should be able to provide much of the information you need.
- Ask your guide to make arrangements for your visit to the community. Be prepared to share background information about yourself and the purpose of your visit.
- If you are still waiting to hear about your visit after several days, follow up informally by phone with the Aboriginal liaison worker to see how the arrangements are going. Be patient and as flexible as possible. Allow time for a response.
- If more time passes and you have not heard back, follow up with a more formal letter to the chief and council.
- If more time passes and you have not heard back, contact the local Band Office Administration by phone to explain your needs. Discuss what you would like to do on your visit and get direction on how to proceed.



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## ABORIGINAL PARENTS OFFER ADVICE TO OTHER PARENTS

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- Let your voice be heard by the teacher and, if need be, by the administration. If you have a concern, continue to speak up, as it is the only way positive changes will happen.
- Ask to sit in on classes to see what is happening.
- Talk with other parents who have children in the class.
- Look for local parent support groups and find out about other resources.
- Get to know the teacher by name and make sure he or she knows how to contact you.
- Tell the teacher how you may be contacted if you don’t have a phone.
- Make an appointment with the teacher to discuss any specific concerns. Make arrangements to telephone or write a letter if you are unable to meet.
- Ask that the teacher, principal, liaison worker or school counsellor meet with you in your home if you would feel more comfortable meeting there.
- Read the school newsletters, as they often contain valuable information that concerns your child.
- Become familiar with the school’s policies and procedures about attendance, discipline and other issues.
- Don’t be afraid to ask questions.
- Go to all parent-teacher conferences.
- Keep all school information in one place so it’s handy for meetings at the school or when seeing others in the community about your child.
- Volunteer to share a craft or special skill from your culture.

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