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Continuing the Journey:

Opening Doors and Expanding Opportunities: *PART TWO*



Building Leadership & Connecting Students with Indigenous Cultures and Ideas

By Teresa Di Ninno and Sara Fairbrother, CAPE Public Charter School

Foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures and histories is an integral component of inclusive learning environments in our province, as clearly stated in the various quality standards. During the past three years, the Centre for Academic and Personal Excellence (CAPE) has been engaged in promoting excellence in leadership, excellence in teaching, and optimum learning through mentorship at all levels through the CAPE Indigenous Education Team (CIET).

Under the leadership of the superintendent, CIET has involved teachers and staff, who volunteer their time and knowledge in support of indigenous studies. The intent is to build staff capacity for seamlessly embedding First Nations, Métis, and Inuit concepts within mainstream education programming. This integrated approach aligns beautifully with CAPE's integration program and the focus on world cultures and multiculturalism that permeates our school. The CIET team members actively seek out community opportunities throughout the year and bring their experiences and new information back to the school. Having a dedicated group for indigenous education alleviates some of the workload for teachers allowing them to take more of an active learner role. These efforts have resulted in a coordination of leader education, streamlining the professional development of all CAPE staff.

Collectively, the team has curated a list of written and visual/oral resources and shared this with all staff. This document is routinely updated and revised by all staff. Individually, members of the CIET team have explored various avenues to expand and deepen their own understandings of indigenous culture and ways of learning. Some members have



Two of the winning student designs on orange shirts for Truth and Reconciliation Day.

sought online courses offered through Alberta's universities focusing on both historical and current issues. Other members have conferred with local, and distant members of indigenous communities in an effort to bring authentic voices into the school. The CIET team includes the south zone representative for the ATA Indigenous Education Committee. This individual can not only experience broad practices from around the province, but also share and collaborate within all faculties serviced by the ATA.

Connections made with groups across Alberta have facilitated a rounded and holistic approach to indigenous studies for both staff and students. Through an ongoing cultural exchange with Mother Earth Children's Charter School (MECCS), our schools have fostered student-led teachings serving the double purpose of providing students with authentic cultural educa-

tion and instilling confidence and pride in our students. Last year, this partnership included a three-day camp at the MECCS site for the grade 4/5 students. The teachers served primarily as guides, as the hosting students enthusiastically shared their culture and skills actively engaging guest students in activities. This education model has proven extremely effective for staff and students. The 'teachers' deepened their own knowledge and skills and the 'learners' were more comfortable in a peer-to-peer environment.

As much as the culture-share experience at MECCS places students in leadership roles, the CIET team at CAPE endeavours to do the same through student-directed initiatives. Working on the scaffolding model, the CIET team, through regular meetings, creates step-by-step programs that teachers

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then deliver. Starting with information sharing to ensure broad understanding, the team then puts together and provides grade appropriate resources tailored for each class. These, however, do not end with student-generated products, but

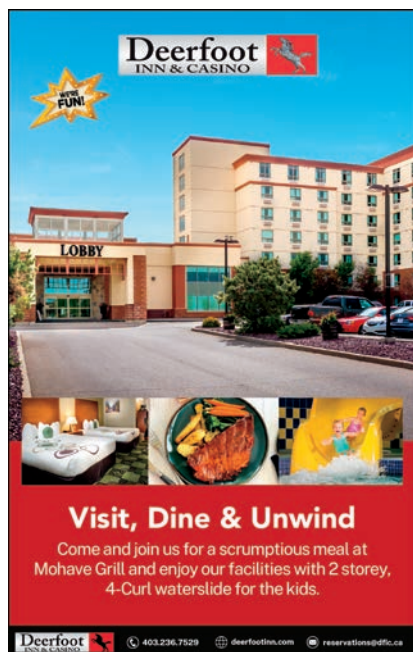
rather provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their own understanding in personal ways. For example, when the CAPE Board of Directors approved the purchase of orange shirts for each student and staff to be worn on Truth and Reconciliation Day, the junior high students, after education and reflection, were asked to generate designs. Through a voting process, two designs were selected, and silk screened onto the shirts.

As CIET evolves, leadership refines, staff knowledge and understanding deepens, student engagement and involvement grows, and the scope of programming changes. The available resources traditionally centre on teacher-focused teaching and learning that, regrettably, tend to result in student rote learning, surface understanding of customs and culture, and the relegation of indigenous cultural experiences to one-time events. CIET is finding that in order to promote holistic and whole student learning, the indigenous teachings need to be permeated into the daily school life. Indigenous education thus becomes woven into the culture of the school. With guidance

from teachers and staff, themselves guided and supported by the CIET team, students take ownership of their own learning, are better equipped to delve more deeply and meaningfully into First Nations, Métis and Inuit histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts, and experiences have value beyond the classroom. Students move forward as leaders, sharing and living their new understandings. ■

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Sara Fairbrother, B.Ed., is an alumnus of Mount Royal University and was born and raised in south Alberta. She had spent several years living in various countries abroad prior to entering the teaching profession which ignited her passion for cultural studies and understanding. Sara is entering her fifth year teaching at CAPE Public Charter School.



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