

Indigenous education top priority for board

By **Sam Odrowski**

Staff writer

sodrowski@fortfrances.com

Indigenous education is a top priority at the Rainy River District School Board and work constantly is being done to increase students' knowledge, understanding, and awareness of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit histories.

Earlier this month, indigenous education lead Bob Kowal gave a presentation to trustees with the help of the indigenous education team at the local public board.

The team is committed to improving the well-being and achievement of indigenous students while embedding culture into classrooms, as well as supporting teachers to implement curriculum developed in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's "Calls

to Action."

These "Calls to Action" include making an age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, treaties, and aboriginal people's historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory requirement for students from kindergarten to Grade 12.

"I think our work to embed indigenous culture, history, and perspectives across the curriculum is something to be celebrated," said Director of Education Heather Campbell.

"It's our hope by the end of this year we will develop for Grade 10 Civics resources on indigenous governance," she noted.

"It's really important that students see themselves and their communities reflected in their learning," she stressed.

A little over 40 percent of board students self-identity as

either First Nation, Métis, or Inuit, compared to just two percent provincially, and Kowal agreed it's important for indigenous students to be represented in the curriculum.

"Research shows that students need to see themselves reflected in their learning," he remarked. "Any student that does see themselves in their learning will be a better student.

"They'll be more engaged."

But it's also equally important that non-indigenous students understand the cultures and histories of those who are indigenous to build empathy and respect.

"It's a win-win for our kids," Kowal said. "It's good for indigenous students because they get to learn more about their culture and history but it's also good for our non-indigenous [students].

"Say if you're talking about residential schools," he noted. "That's clearly a sadder part of our Canadian history but it still resonates with the kids.

"That's important for them to know."

Kowal is working with the board to ensure indigenous education is "imbricated" throughout the curriculum so it is woven between all of its teachings.

In terms of proven best practices for indigenous learners, Kowal looks to Laurentian University professor Dr. Pamela Toulouse's work, which focuses on small group instruction, a holistic approach, processing times, and hands-on manipulatives.

Small group instruction has been implemented into the board's pedagogy, and also is being done in math classes as well as guided reading.

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"In small group instruction, the students are more apt to share and provide feedback in a smaller group as opposed to a larger classroom," Kowal noted.

"There's a lot of cultural reasons for that."

The holistic approach focuses on the big picture and then working down to the specific details.

Processing times, meanwhile, is the amount of time allotted to students to respond after being asked a question.

"When you ask a student a question, it is important to give them more time to reflect on it and give them some time to think," Kowal said.

With hands-on manipulative, it focuses on a kinesthetic learning style where students use a hands-on approach to their learning.

"I see kids that fidget lots, it's also kind of cathartic," Kowal explained. "It gives them time to think and focus on something else and the work that they're trying to do."

"Those strategies are really beneficial for indigenous students but they're also beneficial for all students," he added.

"Again, it is a win-win situation."

The board recently held a cultural competency training day that was sponsored by the Ontario Federation of Indigenous Friendship Centres and the staff who attended had an overwhelmingly positive response.

In fact, 90 percent of the staff who took the training said it met or exceeded their expectations.

"It's only a day training so it encompasses a lot, but that particular training has been very positive," Kowal lauded.

"It was effective and well-received by the [staff] and we had lots of requests to do more."

This year, the board will host "Indigenous Relationship Training" in late April, which will be very similar and facilitated through the Seven Generation Education Institute's culture/Anishinaabemowin instructor Robert Horton.

"Everybody in the board is taking that [training] so whether you're a custodian or an educational assistant, we at the board feel that everybody's an educator," Kowal said.

Meanwhile, students in Grade 12 who would like to continue to learn Ojibwe—and have it count as a university credit—will be able to do so this fall at Fort High.

The Ojibwe language course

"The ultimate goal of the Ojibwe language strategy is to get kids to think about careers in education."

—Bob Kowal

is the first university-level course of its kind to be offered in the province, and has been co-created with Lakehead University and the Seven Generations Education Institute.

"It's designation is university and that's very important because currently in the ministry curriculum there is no . . . Ojibwe course being offered that students are able to take that can be used towards their six credits to go to university," Kowal explained.

"By offering this course, our hope is that more students will take it and then they have a different pathway to get through that allows them to continue learning their language."

Language preservation is huge, Kowal stressed, and this course provides another opportunity for students to preserve their language and go to university.

"The ultimate goal of the Ojibwe language strategy is to get kids to think about careers in education," he said.

To promote native language speaking from an early age, the public board currently has several partnerships and agreements with child care centres where they learn how to speak in Ojibwe.

"We're starting with the little ones and then making that move forward so when they get into [school], they've already got the basics and the backgrounds and they're starting that language as soon as possible, which is critical," Kowal stressed.

Overall, he said he's pleased with the work being done to promote the Ojibwe language throughout the board.

"Of all the three boards that I've worked in, this is the best strategy I've seen so far to try to encourage [indigenous] language speaking," Kowal lauded.

"This is a priority for the board and it will continue to be a priority for the board," he remarked.

"It's something that needs to be successful . . . to ensure the language continues."