

Module 16 – First Nation Trustees: Unique Roles & Responsibilities

[Introduction]

Boards and individual First Nation trustees play a meaningful role in developing education programs that meet the unique needs of First Nation, Métis and Inuit students in our elementary and secondary schools. They can also engage with First Nation, Métis and Inuit leaders in the local community to ensure there is rich programming for all students on the cultures, histories, perspectives and world views of First Nation, Métis, and Inuit peoples. Members of First Nation, Métis and Inuit communities are interested in finding ways to promote and support the success and well-being of their children.

All trustees have a role in representing First Nation, Métis and Inuit students and their families at the board table and beyond to ensure their voices are heard and to promote student success and well-being.

The First Nation trustee has a unique responsibility to act in the best interests of First Nation students who attend the schools of the board under an education services agreement.

[Trustee Voices]

[Peter Garrow, First Nation Trustee, Upper Canada DSB]

We are becoming much more visible. We are also — by strength and numbers — pushing forward our ideas on the importance of histories and traditions of our people in education, not just for our students, but for all students in Ontario. And I think that is a remarkable challenge for all of us. A few years ago we had about 35 students in Native Studies; now we have over 1000. And they are not just our Native students or Mohawk students. Native Studies have really taken off and I find that very rewarding. But there is so much more we have to do — not just within the school system but within our whole society.

[Michele Locke, Trustee, Simcoe County DSB]

In all of our schools we have an increasing number of kids who are self-identifying as Métis. As the Chair of the First Nation Education Advisory Committee, I've been overseeing and helping with the process of our new self-identification program. I go into the schools and make sure that, as a Métis person, I feel comfortable, because kids need a sense of belonging. They are reading great authors, Métis authors, stories about Louis Riel and things like that. It brings their lives and their history into a reality and they have a sense of ownership. They learn where their place is in that history and there is also a great sense of ownership and stewardship to the environment when you know that your family has been there for generations.

Good Governance for School Boards: Trustee Professional Development Program

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[Michael Brant, First Nation Trustee, Hastings and Prince Edward DSB]

I see my job as representing our community on the board. And really what that means is being able to share with our Hastings and Prince Edward District School Board any of the information that's important to continue to have our students do well. I want them to have the best opportunity and the best support that we can have in place for them to have the kind of success that they want to have.

[Harry Jones, Former First Nation Trustee, Algoma DSB]

Overall I think it's a good educational system. It is just that without understanding the Native culture it falls short, and I think history will cover this. Very few Canadians know their history the way I think they should. Our history is part of a European and English history, and that's not who we are. We should have our own history and the history of everybody else's put together — because, you know, we're Canadians!

[Amanda Monague, Former First Nation Trustee, Simcoe County DSB]

It's definitely making sure that the supports are there for First Nation students, as well as Métis and Inuit students. Just communicating with the communities as to the kind of programs, initiatives, strategies that the board currently offers and will be offering to students. It is great to see that there is an increase in support from the boards to the band-operated schools that are there. The principals are attending the area principal meetings that the board offers, so it gives them a great chance to network with other principals. I would say an increase in the links between the cultures of First Nations, Métis and Inuit within the community. I know with the school board there was a project with treaties resources that were infused into the curriculum for grade 6 to grade 10, and it is great to see that those things are happening within the school board. Once the curriculum is relevant as well as meaningful to the students, I find that there is a higher level of student engagement.

[Norma Kejick, Former First Nation Trustee, Keewatin Patricia DSB]

We have a higher percentage of Aboriginal students in our board. There are about 40% First Nation students across the board, but in two of our schools we may be 70%-80% First Nation students. What I would like to see is all the things that we are doing in all of our schools. We have the Seven Grandfather Teachings. There are posters on the wall; there are different elders that come into our schools. There is a lot of stuff with the language and culture in all of our schools. When I sit at the table I would like to ensure that the culture and language are a big part of our teachings in our schools.

[Wrap-up]

In our schools we strive for the kind of holistic and integrated approach that will help achieve successful outcomes for First Nation, Métis and Inuit students. We want teaching strategies that meet First Nation, Métis and Inuit learner needs, curriculum that reflects First Nation, Métis and Inuit cultures and perspectives, and a school environment where First Nation, Métis and Inuit students can thrive and where their parents feel welcome.