

To the Community of North Vancouver

We proudly acknowledge the Coast Salish people upon whose traditional territories North Vancouver School District resides. We extend our gratitude to the Squamish Nation and Tsleil Waututh Nation for the opportunity to learn, share and grow in educational experiences on these traditional territories.

Answering the calls: an open letter to the community in support of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee's Calls to Action for Education

On June 2, 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) publicly released its findings on Indian Residential Schools in a comprehensive report to all Canadians. The report summarizes the statements, documents and research gathered by the TRC over its six-year mandate to understand, record and communicate the history, impacts and legacy of the Indian Residential School system.

Released with the report were 94 Calls to Action made by the Commission to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation in Canada. Through several specific Calls to Action, the Commission emphasized the role of education in achieving reconciliation.

"Starting now," said the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair, Chair of the TRC, "we all have an opportunity to show leadership, courage and conviction in helping heal the wounds of the past as we make a path towards a more just, more fair and more loving country."

On December 15, 2015, the TRC released its final report in Ottawa, marking the completion of the first stage of the journey towards reconciliation.

Our understanding

We agree, as the Commission states, that "...all Canadians have a critical role to play in advancing reconciliation in ways that honour and revitalize the nation-to-nation Treaty relationship."¹ Reconciliation can only be achieved when the wrongs of the past are understood. Educators have an important role to play in promoting understanding and sharing knowledge. As the Commission asserts, so do we affirm: "Schools must teach history in ways that foster mutual respect, empathy and engagement. All Canadian children and youth deserve to know Canada's honest history, including what happened in the residential schools, and to appreciate the rich history and knowledge of Indigenous nations who continue to make such a strong contribution to Canada, including our very name and collective identity as a country. For Canadians from all walks of life, reconciliation offers a new way of living together."²

The value, to present and future generations, of mutually respectful relationships cannot be underestimated. The role of educators and school communities in fostering these relationships is profound. We understand and rise to our responsibility to share the truth of Canada's past and facilitate reconciliation between Aboriginal³ and non-Aboriginal people to find a new way forward.

Our commitment

We are committed to creating and implementing reconciliation through education in all our schools. This commitment is grounded in our Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement that states: "we intend, with shared participation and wisdom, to work together in a mutually respectful manner to develop appropriate and meaningful programs for the benefit of all students of Aboriginal ancestry" and all students in the North Vancouver School District.

In its report, the Commission presented several key Calls to Action specific to education. While we await further developments and improvements in funding levels and legislative reform for Aboriginal education, locally we will:

- Strive to improve education attainment levels for all students of Aboriginal ancestry through relevant, engaging curriculum, teaching and learning supports that guide and strengthen the learning process;
- Continue to infuse the local curriculum with Aboriginal knowledge and perspective to further broaden and enrich the learning experience of all students;
- Recognize the right and ensure the ongoing provision of local First Nations language teaching, including credit courses; and
- Facilitate the full responsibility and participation of Aboriginal parents in the education of their children.

Our work

We are grateful for our team of Aboriginal Education specialists, and educators, who facilitate professional development opportunities for our staff and cultural awareness experiences that promote Aboriginal history and perspectives. Through their efforts, locally developed learning materials and methodologies are available in our School District to enhance classroom teaching through Aboriginal Ways of Knowing, historical experiences, place-based wisdom, and Aboriginal voices in fine arts, literature and media studies. Age-appropriate teaching of the history and legacy of the Indian Residential Schools system is a vital part of this work. Provincially, the new curriculum for British Columbia provides additional supports for integrating Aboriginal culture and perspectives throughout all grade levels, strengthening our ability to deliver upon the TRC's Calls to Action for education.

Since 1986, the Skw'unc-was (Bighouse) program has been sharing the practices of Coast Salish people with visitors to the North Vancouver Outdoor School at Cheakamus Centre. In our School District, students in grade 4 have the opportunity to experience the rich culture of the Squamish people through their overnight stay at the Bighouse.

Funding through the North Vancouver School District Aboriginal Grant brings unique field trip, cultural awareness and guest speaker programs to schools. Instruction in artisanal skills and traditional cultural experiences, including dancing, drumming, carving and weaving are provided through the gracious leadership of Aboriginal artists, craftspeople and elders.

Welcome Poles and Aboriginal art grace the entrances and hallways of our schools as constant reminders of the mutually respectful relationships upon which successful learning environments depend. The Welcome Poles are often completed as a collaboration between skilled carvers and students, and stand as a testament to what can be accomplished when school communities and First Nations work together.

Our schools and libraries are opening their doors to award-winning Aboriginal authors whose authentic voices and stories provide insight and encourage empathy. Annual purchases of library materials by Indigenous authors ensure wide availability of First Nations perspectives and experiences, as conveyed through literature.

National Aboriginal Day on June 21st is celebrated across our School District to recognize the unique heritage, diverse cultures, achievements and contributions of Canada's Aboriginal peoples. Some schools prepare week-long community events featuring traditional stories, songs, games and dances that inspire us all.

On September 30, 2015, we joined the annual "every child matters" Orange Shirt Day as an expression of our awareness in the spirit of healing and reconciliation.

On October 22, 2015, we proudly welcomed author, Anishinaabemowin advocate, journalist and radio broadcaster Wab Kinew to speak in our School District. Wab Kinew is also Associate Vice-President for Indigenous Relations at the University of Winnipeg and an Honourary Witness for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. He shared his thoughts with Carson Graham students about how youth can make a difference in reconciliation and moving forward and discussed "Leadership Through an Indigenous Lens" with our principals, vice-principals and senior executive.

In as much as this work is already underway, we must strengthen its foundations to see it carry forward. We are grateful to the residential school survivors and their descendants who have shared their stories and, in so doing, courageously supported a more informed and inclusive learning environment for all students. This understanding is rooted in our work to indigenize the curriculum and broaden knowledge and understanding of our shared history.

Reconciliation, as the Commission declares, "is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country.... Reconciliation must inspire Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to transform Canadian society so that our children and grandchildren can live together in dignity, peace, and prosperity on these lands we now share."⁴

We believe the journey towards a more accepting and equitable society begins with education. We pledge our commitment to a better future through reconciliation, respect and remembering. We hope you'll join us.



We appreciate the intentions and commitment of the North Vancouver School District to furthering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action for Education.

