

Client Profile

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‘Walking in both worlds’

Innovative program helps First Nations students see the value of staying in school

Building a house would be a rare assignment for any high-school student, but proved to be a life-changing experience for at least one from the Fishing Lake First Nation in Saskatchewan, about 200 kilometres east of Saskatoon.

Over four weeks this past spring, a dozen students from the school in Fishing Lake were tasked with building a three-bedroom home in their community, in partnership with First Nation home builder Your Choice Homes Inc.

The exercise was part of the “land-based learning” and experiential projects that are encouraged and supported by Treaty 4 Education Alliance Inc. (T4EA), a federally funded educational organization created in 2009 to serve 12 participating First Nations within the Treaty 4 Territory.

Lori Whiteman, T4EA’s executive director and a member of the Standing Buffalo Dakota First Nation, says one student in particular credits the home building project for keeping him in school and for his current job in the construction trade.

“Had it not been for that project, he would never have realized the possibilities of life outside of his reserve,” Whiteman says. “He was very close to dropping out of school. He didn’t see the value in school. By participating in that project, he connected with people in his own community in ways he would never have [otherwise]. It really inspired him and motivated him.”

It’s just one of many success stories that have come out of T4EA schools, an innovative program with a mission to improve the education of First Nations children by focusing on four areas: student literacy, numeracy, retention and community engagement.

The program’s key goal is to support each student to become a “Treaty 4 Nation Builder,” where schools offer an education that prioritizes Indigenous history and culture, balanced with learning about life outside of their community. It’s what Whiteman calls “walking in both worlds.”



Treaty 4 Education Alliance Inc. is “re-imagining lifelong learning through a First Nations lens,” says program director Lori Whiteman.



“This is an exciting and historical time for First Nations on reserve education,” says Whiteman. “It’s much bigger than just getting students to jump through the hoops of Western education. It’s about creating an educational system that responds to the longstanding inequities and the experiences that First Peoples’ have had through colonization, the residential schools – all of the issues that have affected us over a long period of time.”

Whiteman says the program is about “deinstitutionalizing ‘school’ and ‘education’ as structures,” which she says were not created for First Nations people.

“We are re-imagining lifelong learning through a First Nations lens, and supporting schools to be creative and courageous as they plan for student success,” she says. “We have to believe in ourselves and the incredible wisdom and sophistication of our ancestors, who understood deeply what learning success was.”

The T4EA board of directors includes representation from each of the participating 12 First Nations, which Whiteman says “inspired and guided our vision from the start.”

“T4EA was designed so that each First Nation, through their school, could really look at how that school came to be in that nation, what the importance of it is, and situate that school as part of the Treaty and inherent rights to education each nation has,” Whiteman says. “Otherwise we are simply replicating a provincial or western model of education.”

Setting the context for treaty and inherent rights to education is at the centre of what T4EA calls the “Hummingbird Literacy Project,” which Whiteman says reminds staff to think critically and through a lens that enhances Indigenous knowledge.

An example of a Hummingbird-inspired project is the ongoing “Who We Are, Where We Come From” book series, where each First Nation in the alliance worked with renowned Cree artist Michael Lonechild, along with their teachers, local elders and staff to write and illustrate a book about the history of their First Nation.

“When children are reflected in positive ways in their learning resources and environment, they are more likely to be engaged and use the pride they have in their identity as a source of strength along their learning pathways,” says Whiteman.

T4EA has also been part of the “Confident Learners” early literacy program, designed in consultation with a national First Nations advisory panel to support the successful development of literacy skills of children in First Nations communities.

Overall, there are about 180 teachers and more than 1,400 students from kindergarten to Grade 12 enrolled in T4EA schools this year. More than 280 students have graduated from high school since the T4EA program began, some of who have gone on to study at trades and post-secondary schools in other parts of the country.

“A lot of these young people want to participate in and support their community and help it grow,” Whiteman says.

“Even though we are a small organization with limited funding and capacity, we have remained focused on developing a program that will carry us into the future, which are relevant to communities and to kids, and that will give them a solid footing in their future,” Whiteman says.



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Build a Positive Image: Incorporating a strong sense of awareness of the causes or issues that are important to you will help your business to resonate with customers. With increased competition, you can stand out from the crowd by showcasing your focus on your community.

Measure Your Impact: Before you go to market, determine how you will quantify your success. Track the factors that will reveal that you've made a difference and where there is room for improvement; positive media buzz, customer feedback, awards and other recognition. Set goals accordingly and continually measure your progress.

Share Your Story: Whether the impacts are tangible or not, your clients want an update on your company's positive impacts. Consider how and when you want to communicate with your network and staff and provide regular updates. Social media is a good channel for this. By promoting your investment in sustainability or social causes and ultimately the benefits they bring will reflect positively on your brand.

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