

A Virtual Circle: Najuna Ats'ila-hi – Embodying the Spirit and Intent of Treaty for Student Success

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Helmut Kaiser, Lori Pritchard & Cindy Stefanato



The intent of a CASS Learning Guide is to apply research, deepen understanding and enhance professional practice within the Alberta context. With a focus on optimum learning for all students, a Learning Guide provides an opportunity to grow system leader knowledge, resulting in quality school leadership and quality teaching throughout Alberta.

Summary

Building Effective Relationships

Ensuring First Nations, Métis and Inuit Education for All Students

The [Guide to Relationships and Learning with the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta](#) reflects the knowledge and wisdom of many, including one of the lead developers, Crystal Clark, of Nehiwayak, Denesuline, and Métis ancestry and an Indigenous Education Consultant. The [Guide's](#) visual flow of leaves from a birch tree is significant. The birch tree was chosen as the concept for the Guide to remind us of our deeply rooted connection to the natural world.



This virtual circle is built on the insights of the [Guide](#) and related CASS resources including: [A Virtual Circle with Elders](#); [Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success](#); and, [Improving Success for Indigenous Students](#).

Each of these resources represents a leaf flowing from the [Guide](#) and the birch tree, reminding us of the importance of building and sustaining respectful, reciprocal relationships. They underscore the need for learning as highlighted in [Optimum Learning For All Students: Implementing Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards](#).

In this webinar, participants were invited to sit in a virtual circle with those who are part of a **Tsuut'ina Education Collaborative**. The idea was to catch a glimpse into the story of how the Tsuut'ina Education Department is working closely with the Calgary Board of

Education (CBE), Calgary Catholic School District (CCSD), and Rocky View Schools. The focus was on the aspirations of young people and to honour insights from Tsuut'ina Knowledge Keepers and Elders. The collaborative approach ensured the inclusion of Tsuut'ina language, culture, and perspectives while **nurturing reciprocal kinship relations** that foster respect, trust, and mutual understanding. Through their unwavering dedication to student success, the Tsuut'ina Education Department and its neighbouring school districts are ensuring that their work embodies the **spirit and intent of treaty** agreements. Watch the [full recording here](#).

(SLOS/LOS) Whereas: Superintendents, principals and school jurisdiction leaders play a fundamental role in establishing the conditions under which the learning aspirations and the potential of First Nations, Métis and Inuit students will be/are realized.

Opening in a Good Way

Crystal welcomed everyone and emphasized the importance of coming together in a good way to build and honour relationship.

Jonathan Kaiswatum, nēhiyawēwin (Treaty 4) and niisitapi (Treaty 7) and Director of Education, Tsuut'ina Education Department opened the circle with smudge and a blessing. [\(view\)](#)

Acknowledgement of Land

Dr. Dianne Roulson, a white settler with Icelandic and French roots and CASS Leadership Consultant, highlighted lessons she has learned from Elders and Knowledge Keepers. These included:

- the importance of showing respect for the contributions and ways of knowing of Indigenous Peoples reflected through

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stories and songs that have lived on this land for thousands of years;

- a teaching from Iikiinayookaa (Marlene Yellowhorn, Kainai Nation, Principal, CBE) that land acknowledgement is not something you do, rather, it is something you feel – a lesson passed on to Iikiinayookaa from her grandfather; and,
- a teaching from Lori Pritchard (Métis and Ukrainian from Saskatchewan, Education Director, CBE) that identifying a commitment to action must always be connected to land acknowledgement. ([3:38](#))

Invitation to the Circle and Land Connect Moment

Crystal invited participants to imagine themselves on the land and settle into a spot around a fire as they prepared to listen, connect, learn, and reflect. She emphasized the pedagogy of Indigenous



learning that brings us together in circle. She also provided an opportunity for participants to connect to land through their imaginations and hearts. This was done to set the tone for the virtual circle while modelling the need to acknowledge and become aware of our deeply rooted

relationships to one another and the natural world. ([8:40](#))

Spirit and Intent and Navigation of the [Guide](#)

Crystal, one of the key developers of the [Guide](#), talked about the birch tree image featured throughout as representing our connection to one another through land, life and breath. She described the [Guide](#) as a starting point; a branch or leaves on a tree that represent a small part of the whole tree within a forest. It was developed in 2019 and updated in 2022 to support system education leaders begin the process of deepening their understanding. The real work, she said, is connecting and working with Indigenous Peoples and community and building respectful relationships over time. ([14:01](#))

Resources Growing from the Guide



In the spirit of strengthening relationships, Dianne highlighted the three additional resources that flow from the [Guide](#) and represent leaves on the birch tree ([A Virtual Circle with Elders](#); [Improving Success for Indigenous Students](#); and

[Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success \(ESA Guide\)](#). The latter focuses on Education Service Agreements (ESAs) and is directly tied to the webinar topic. ESAs are agreements between First Nations and provincial school authorities. They come into place when students living on reserve attend provincial schools and when students living in the city attend school on reserve. The [ESA Guide](#) offers heartfelt and honest guidance from many leaders, including members from the CASS First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education Action Committee. It includes a video series with Makoyapi, Bill Shade, Kainai First Nation, and Superintendent of Stoney Education Authority offering guidance and wisdom to system education leaders. It also features a video series that tells the beautiful story of practice that features the Tsuut'ina Education Collaborative. ([20:22](#))

Presenter Introductions

Steven Crowchild, Minor Chief, Tsuut'ina Nation Xakujaayina/Chief and Council ([23:23](#))

Jonathan Kaiswatum, Director of Education, Tsuut'ina Education Department ([27:44](#))

Helmut Kaiser, Director of Learning Services with the Calgary Catholic School District ([32:57](#))

Lori Pritchard, Education Director for Indigenous Education with the Calgary Board of Education ([47:25](#))

Cindy Stefanato, Director of Indigenous Learning, Rocky View Schools ([34:58](#))

Introducing the Collaborative



Tsuut'ina Ninisha – Tsuut'ina Values

Steven and Jonathan shared [Tsuut'ina Ninisha – Tsuut'ina Values](#) ([37:18](#)) as an introduction to Tsuut'ina Nation; part of a video series developed by the Nation to highlight Tsuut'ina values. They described Tsuut'ina as part of the Dene Athabaskan language group with a population of 2,365, 63% of whom are under 25; underscoring young people as the future. They shared a map of the Nation and highlighted key dimensions that make the Nation distinct. Steven described the translation of *Najuna* as 'relatives' and *Ats'ila-hi* as 'the process of making relatives', shared with him by Tsuut'ina Elder Bruce Starlight. He explained that *Najuna Ats'ila-hi* represents Tsuut'ina worldview and understanding of Treaty. ([37:18](#))

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**Introducing Calgary Catholic School District**

Helmut Kaiser, of German ancestry and Director of Learning Services, talked about the population of CCSD including over 63,000 students and 6000 staff members. Within their overall population, 1700 students self-identify as Indigenous. This includes 125 Tsuut'ina Nation Citizens. ([42:59](#))

**Introducing Calgary Board of Education**

Jonathan Kaiswatum spoke on behalf of Lori Pritchard, Métis and Ukrainian from Saskatchewan and Education Director, CBE, who was unable to attend. CBE is the largest school district in Western Canada and has approximately 140,000 students and 15,000 staff members. Within their overall population, about 6500 students identify as Indigenous. This includes 128 Tsuut'ina Nation Citizens. ([47:25](#))

**Introducing Rocky View Schools**

Cindy Stefanato, Anishinabek from Fort William First Nation and Director of Indigenous Learning, RVS, talked about the population of RVS including just about 29,000 students and 6000 staff members. Within their overall population, 1370 students self-identify as Indigenous. This includes 6 Tsuut'ina Nation Citizens. Cindy emphasized that while each of the districts look differently, their work is very similar in many ways. They share values and an emphasis on building respectful relationships to support student success. She described the way they have gone about ESAs as effective because they have gone about it in a good way, with their hearts. ([48:26](#))

Sharing the Tsuut'ina Education Collaborative Story Through Images

Steven, Jonathan, Cindy, Helmut, (and Lori) shared the story of the Collaborative through a series of photographs. They highlighted the following themes as key to their work together. ([50:12](#))

**Mutual Understanding**

Steven emphasized the importance of Tsuut'ina language and worldview as part of the process of making relatives. He talked about how much more there is to treaty than what is written, including a spiritual dimension. Taking time to make sure they are building understanding that is centered on Tsuut'ina language and worldview and in the service of student learning has been a critical part of their journey together. He emphasized this process as a

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profound shift from 'financial reconciliation' to 'truth and reconciliation'. ([50:12](#))

**Getting to Know One Another**

Helmut highlighted the way they brought their teams (e.g., legal, finance, transportation, teaching and learning) together to share meals and build trust and friendship. The idea of 'visiting' has been an essential part of that process and provided time for them to learn about each other, their families, their backgrounds, and their worldviews. He emphasized that building that trust and friendship was at the forefront of everything before they created a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or began any ESA discussions. ([59:35](#))

**Supporting Student Learning**

As part of the MOU process with CCSD, Helmut highlighted some concrete actions they have taken. These include: prioritizing opportunities for Tsuut'ina language learning for teachers and students and inviting Tsuut'ina Nation schools to be part of the provincial school Junior High Athletics Association. Each of these actions has had a positive impact on student learning. ([1:00:36](#))

**Knowledge Keepers and Elders**

Helmut described various ways they have sought guidance and wisdom from Tsuut'ina Elders and participated in learning opportunities on the Nation. Jonathan emphasized that these times together underscore the deep commitment to learning and respect for the distinct nature of Tsuut'ina knowledge and traditions. ([1:03:42](#))

**Making Relatives**

Jonathan talked about how they have come together with staff members from CBE (e.g., legal, finance, transportation, special education, Indigenous education) to share a meal and get to know one another. During their time, they focused on the Tsuut'ina mission, values, and vision and developed a shared understanding that is at the heart of everything they do together on behalf of students. As they have come to know one another, they have been able to be flexible in order to meet the needs of Tsuut'ina students and families. ([1:08:22](#))

**Respect**

Steven described how they are working together to make ESAs more user friendly and reflective of what is actually



happening for students. Creating MOUs as part of the ESA process has been very important. They now have smaller committees taking care of different areas including, for example, transportation, attendance, language and culture, tours on the Nation, professional development, events, and celebrations. He emphasized how their collaboration has opened the door for meaningful action to take place in timely and innovative ways. ([1:10:40](#))



Trust

Jonathan shared how they invited everyone come together rather than attempting to meet with each district separately. Doing so has been a gift in many ways including saving valuable time. It has also brought about unanticipated collaboration beyond the ESAs including for example, the sharing resources, processes, and knowledge to remove barriers for students and families. Trust has been at the heart of their relationship. ([1:12:50](#))



Connecting with the Nation

Cindy highlighted Banded Peak School as located directly 'across the street' from Tsuut'ina Nation, on traditional Tsuut'ina land. They have worked closely with the Nation to offer cultural and language teachings and host learning opportunities and events for the benefit of all students. They have nurtured relationships with Tsuut'ina families and community and, over time, many families have been willing to share their knowledge and wisdom. Cindy described reciprocity as a key feature of their relationship. ([1:15:53](#))



Community, Respect, Relationship, Culture

Cindy described the annual raising of a tipi gifted to the school as one of the many ways they come together with Tsuut'ina community members. Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are involved in the process and familiar with the teachings that have become an embedded and valued part of their learning. They have built relationships with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and family members who have a regular presence in the school and with whom they visit on the Nation. Cindy said they have created consistency in the learning experience for students that gives them the choice to attend either a Nation School and Banded Peak and to make a transition with ease. ([1:21:13](#))



Culture

Jonathan said that as someone who is not from the Nation, it is very important for him to draw on Nation members to speak

on behalf of the Nation and keep the cultural teachings and knowledge forefront. Honouring culture and the Tsuut'ina worldview and way of life is an essential part of the Collaborative as they make relatives and work together to support student success. ([1:22:49](#))

Closing:

Exploring the Resources

Dianne encouraged participants to explore the various resources highlighted in the webinar that are available on the CASS website. She emphasized, in particular the [ESA Guide, Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success](#), as tied to the featured story. ([1:26:04](#))

The Treaty Relationship

Steven provided closing comments, emphasizing that when students are at the center of decisions and there is love for the students, there are far better decisions and outcomes. He said Indigenous people and communities can feel the difference when people are authentic and are really trying to understand and walk together. The foundation of repairing the damage that was done to Nation sovereignty is the Treaty relationship. Honouring self-determination of Indigenous communities and working side by side is what will bring healing and success for young people, communities, and society at large. ([1:28:01](#))

Gratitude and Honouring Knowledge

As part of the closing, Dianne and Crystal expressed gratitude to all who were part of the circle. Crystal offered a gift to the presenters in the spirit of reciprocity and to honour their knowledge and time. It was made by **Shieda Meechance** of O'Chiese First Nation and is a beaded leaf on birch bark. Shieda offered protocol to a birch tree and harvested the bark from her back yard. She designed the gift specifically to honour our collective work and to exemplify our relationships with one another and the natural world. The gift was made with love and clearly embodied the symbolism of the birch tree as a reminder of continued relationship to one another and the natural world to support student success. ([1:31:15](#))

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Questions for Reflection and Dialogue Within Your Context

1. How are we working to build and sustain respectful relationships with local First Nations, Métis and Inuit?
2. How are we engaging and collaborating with First Nations, Métis and Inuit to optimize learning success for First Nations, Métis and Inuit students? How do we know?
3. What differences are these relationships making for young people and their learning? How do we know?
4. What are our next steps and how will I put one learning from this webinar/learning guide into action?

Resources for Building System Leadership Capacity



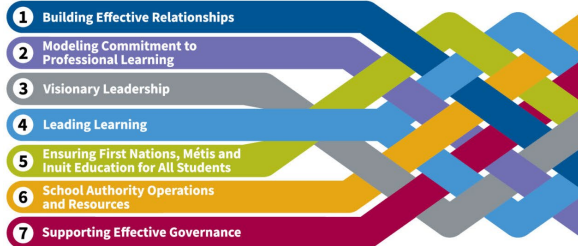
- [A Virtual Circle with Elders](#)
- [Establishing and Sustaining Respectful Relationships for Student Success](#)
- [Guide to Relationships and Learning with the Indigenous Peoples of Alberta](#)
- [Improving Success for Indigenous Students](#)
- [Indigenous Education | Cultural Protocols, Calgary Board of Education](#)
- [Optimum Learning For All Students: Implementing Alberta's 2018 Professional Practice Standards](#)
- [Walking Parallel Paths, Together, in a Good Way. The Office of Indigenous Engagement and ii' taa'poh'to'p, University of Calgary](#)



Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard

Quality superintendent leadership occurs when the superintendent's ongoing analysis of the context, and the superintendent's decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality school leadership, quality teaching and optimum learning for all students in the school authority.

ALBERTA EDUCATION MINISTERIAL ORDER #003/2020



Leadership Quality Standard

Quality leadership occurs when the leader's ongoing analysis of the context, and decisions about what leadership knowledge and abilities to apply, result in quality teaching and optimum learning for all school students.

ALBERTA EDUCATION MINISTERIAL ORDER #002/2020



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