

CALL TO ACTION ON EDUCATION:

*The Exclusion and Lack of Consultation
with Elders and First Nations
in the Alberta Curriculum*



**SUMMARY REPORT
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*"We only learn about
our culture on orange
shirt day."*

-Tsuut'ina Youth

SETTING THE CONTEXT

On February 14-15, 2025, a summit was held at the Grey Eagle Resort and Casino that brought together over 80 Elders, educators, and leaders from treaty territories across Alberta including representatives from all five Treaty 7 Nations. The goal of the two-day gathering was to develop a strategy to address the ways the province has excluded Elders and First Nations in the development of Alberta's K-12 curriculum. CBC News was on hand to cover the event: [Alberta First Nations elders say they weren't properly consulted on new education curriculum](#)

The summit began with an opening address by Tsuut'ina Elder Dr. Bruce Starlight (Hon PhD, LLD), followed by a series of speakers:

Steven Crowchild, Minor Chief Tsuut'ina Nation

Jonathan Kaiswatum (MEd), Director of Education Tsuut'ina Nation

Debbie Smith (BN, MEd), Co-founder of the UCalgary and Old Sun Spirit Helper Nursing Program

Dr. Reggie Crowshoe (Hon PhD, LLD), Elder, Piikani Nation and University of Calgary Senator

Eveline Camille, Elder, Tk'emlups te Secwepemc First Nation

David Bearspaw, Elder and former Chief of Bearspaw First Nation

Dr. Teena Starlight(BEd, MEd, PhD), Indigenous Youth Mentorship Program National Director, Ever Active Schools

Jackie Bromley, Elder, Kainai Blood Tribe

Cora-Lee Starlight-Cappo (BEd, MEd), Coordinator Educational Services Pasqua First Nation

After a break for lunch, participants were given the opportunity to engage in an open discussion concerning how First Nations, and especially Elders, have not been adequately consulted by the Alberta Ministry of Education in the development of new elementary and middle school curricula, which fundamentally shapes the educational experiences of First Nation children and youth going to school both on and off Nation. Throughout the proceedings, doctoral students from the University of Calgary's Werklund School of Education took notes and acted as witnesses to the many testimonies, stories, and wisdom that were shared. On day two, Elder Dr. Bruce Starlight provided a recap of day one. Doctoral students then shared themes of significance they witnessed related to sovereignty, truth before reconciliation, embodied learning, pride, intergenerational connections, systemic barriers, and setting the future foundation for future actions.

Organization of this Summary Report

In what follows, readers will find a summary of six interrelated concerns that were raised during presentations and discussions that occurred over the course of this two-day gathering. This section is followed by an elaboration on each of these themes as witnessed by the doctoral students who participated in this event. The summary report concludes with calls to action to address the ways the Government of Alberta is failing in its Treaty responsibilities to ensure that all First Nations children and youth receive a K-12 education that affirms their unique cultures, values, traditions, and languages. The approach outlined in this report offers the prospect of concrete changes that can be made in both the short and long term.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

Theme 1: An Absence of Meaningful Engagement

To date, the development of the K-12 curriculum in Alberta has involved tokenistic engagements with First Nations rather than the kinds of meaningful collaborations that genuine reconciliation efforts require. By meaningful engagement, we mean that dialogue with each Indigenous community should be more relational and sustained, rather than merely informing First Nations about what is best for them —the colonial bureaucratic attitude. Without meaningful changes, First Nation's children are in danger of becoming separated from their unique cultures, values, traditions, and languages.

Theme 2: There Cannot be Reconciliation Without the Truth

The K-12 curriculum in Alberta fails to fully recognize the full and true history of First Nations' experiences, including the realities of residential schools, the spirit and intent of the treaty process, the impacts of the Natural Resources Transfer Agreement, and the ongoing colonial and paternalistic attitudes of the Government towards First Nations. The exclusion of these critical aspects perpetuates racism, power imbalances, and a lack of empathy, reinforcing misunderstandings about First Nations peoples in Canadian society today.

Theme 3: Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Embodied Learning

The exclusion of Indigenous ways of knowing and embodied learning in Alberta's K-12 curriculum undermines the linguistic and cultural survival, identity, and holistic well-being of Indigenous communities. Grounded in Indigenous worldviews, education is a lifelong process of learning that must honour educational experiences rooted in relationships with land, community, and language.

SUMMARY OF KEY THEMES

Theme 4: Developing a Sense of Pride for First Nation Identities

First Nation Elders, parents and community members observe that the history, language, culture, wisdom, and identity of First Nations people are not properly acknowledged or represented in the school curriculum. As a result, First Nations children are unable to develop a sense of pride in their identity. First Nations children should know that they have a proud history and that their ancestors contributed to the settlement of Canada with their medicines and foods that made it possible for the newcomers to survive. All children should come to recognize and understand the importance and significance of Indigenous cultures, traditions, and knowledge systems.

Theme 5: Strengthening Indigenous Identities Through Intergenerational Connectedness

Intergenerational connectedness is essential for reinforcing First Nations' identities, as it enables children and youth to bridge the lifelong knowledge learned at home and within the community. The present material within the Alberta K-12 curriculum does not bridge that meaningful gap for First Nations children.

Theme 6: Systematic Barriers Must be Addressed to Create Inclusive Learning Environments

Institutional racism continues to persist in the schooling system, which reinforces barriers that hinder the ability of First Nations students to succeed. This state of affairs will continue if the Province does not stop to consider and address this situation properly and with respect. Institutional barriers First Nations students encounter are compounded by chronic underfunding of the educational resources required to support First Nations children including authentic language resources, funds for elder honorariums, and land-based learning opportunities.

ELABORATION OF WITNESSING

AN ABSENCE OF MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT

DR. DAVID SCOTT

In bearing witness to the many testimonies and stories that were shared, I was struck by what is at stake if the exclusion of First Nation Elders and leaders in the K-12 curriculum development process continues. One of the most poignant moments occurred when Elder Dr. Bruce Starlight stated that without significant changes to our current system of education in Alberta, John A. Macdonald's dream of Indigenous people becoming absorbed into the body politic is in danger of becoming a reality. Over the two days, it became clear that the Government of Alberta is failing in its Treaty obligations to ensure that First Nations children, both on and off Nation, have access to a curriculum that affirms and promotes their unique cultures, values, traditions, and languages. A strong consensus emerged that curriculum and associated resources must be co-developed with local First Nation Elders, scholars, and educators who have the authority to validate their authenticity and relevance to student's lives.

For this vision of education to be realized, Elder Dr. Mike Bruised Head of the Kainai Nation asserted that First Nations communities need to engage the Government at all levels from local schools to universities, to government officials. As part of this work, Elder Dr. Mike Bruised Head called for individual First Nations to be proactive in developing their own curriculum to bring forward to education officials. While each nation has the sovereignty to advocate on behalf of their people, Dr. Teena Starlight emphasized that meaningful changes will not happen unless First Nations across the treaty territories engage in these efforts collectively and with a unified voice. This point was affirmed by Cora Starlight-Cappo, who highlighted the ways First Nations leadership in Saskatchewan has been successful in advancing their concerns with Government officials by adopting a united front.

THERE CAN NOT BE RECONCILIATION WITHOUT THE TRUTH

ISRAT JAHAN & ASHLEY WRIGHT

Elder Dr. Bruce Starlight stated that the best people to teach the true history of Calgary are the First Nations people, because they were the ones who were here back then. To know Canada's history, it is important to know the critical history of the Indigenous people in Canada because it was their land, they made this land. It does not matter who calls Canada home now — Indigenous and non-Indigenous — everyone needs to know the true history, vibrant culture and wisdom of the people who walked this land before us.

Residential School survivor Evelyn Camille recounted her horrific experiences and mentions that despite the attempts to erase Indigenous identity, Indigenous people have found ways to preserve their language, culture, and traditions. This resilience is a testament to the strength of Indigenous communities. But even now there are incidents when non-indigenous people would come to her and question her truth, "why are you telling lies to our children?" But these are not lies, these are the lived experiences of many First Nations. Indigenous people still carry the generational trauma of these truths. Elder Evelyn Camille stressed that everyone needs to know these truths, because only by acknowledging the truth can healing, justice, and prevention of future atrocities be ensured. As Deanna Starlight affirmed "there can be no reconciliation without the truth."

ELABORATION OF WITNESSING

INDIGENOUS WAYS OF KNOWING AND EMBODIED LEARNING

SOPHIA THRAYA

Opening with prayer invited a sense of wholeness into the space-emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual -beginning in a good way. The invitation felt like a call to show up and listen not only with my mind but with my whole being-a feeling sustained and nourished throughout the gathering. It was a true gift to be present in this Elder-led space, bearing witness to the oral telling of stories and the "rich knowledges held in the room," as Tsuut'ina Elder Dr. Bruce Starlight made mention. One moment that continues to sit with me is when Piikani Elder Dr. Reggie Crowshoe began his sharing in Blackfoot. His choice reflected how language holds not just words, but the relationships and truths embedded within the knowledge itself. He went on to share how being in a written system is like having one hand-the oral knowledge system-tied behind your back. Both systems need to be brought into conversation, both hands together. Sharing in this space was not bound by colonial norms of English and written knowledge systems, but moved fluidly across languages, aligning with Indigenous ways of knowing.

Dr. Reggie Crowshoe described this as an act of cultural and linguistic survival. Evelyn Camille spoke to how language had been used as an assimilative tool in Residential Schools, where English was the only language for learning, and not speaking it, even forgetting a single word, carried violent consequences. Dr. Reggie Crowshoe offered that "Language allows us to access oral knowledges. We have a lot of local languages that help us access local knowledge." Piikani Elder Herman Many Guns affirmed, "Our language is who and what we are." Dr. Teena Starlight offered, "Speak the language-it is our identity. It is how we will make change and understand our way of life." She spoke of how the land holds these living, dynamic languages and teachings-knowledge that cannot be taught when stripped from the land. "The land has our teachings. Our responsibility is to go to those spots, and the more you include the language, the more teachings will manifest" Dr. Teena Starlight emphasized that land-based learning engages all senses and fosters a deeper connection to culture and community.

"Our grandchildren are teachers too but nobody's recognizing them."

-Elder Deanna Starlight

Seeing elders, knowledge keepers, and community voices witness grandchildren in the space who shared in embodied ways, including hoop and jingle dances, are memories I will forever hold dear. These children and grandchildren are the very ones for whom community members are striving to create transformative change, for this generation and those to follow. Elder Deanna Starlight shared that "our grandchildren are teachers too but nobody's recognizing them", the very children dancing before us, rich experiential and living knowledges-such as raising a tipi-do not have space in the classroom. Dr. Teena Starlight spoke of the need to "put the spirit back into the child" through teachings about ancestors, ceremonies, and traditional practices-recognizing that the very system now tasked with education sought to strip spirit away and the importance for such experiences in school. Languages and teachings are living, meant to be embodied and experienced on and with the land. This gathering was a powerful reminder that these ways of knowing must be actively and intentionally brought into educational spaces. Schools must not only honor but create space for embodied, situated land-based knowledges as part of curriculum and as learning. These teachings, connected to place and community, are essential for nurturing the wholeness of students-emotionally, physically, spiritually, and intellectually.

ELABORATION OF WITNESSING

THE CURRICULUM FAILING TO DEVELOP A SENSE OF PRIDE FOR INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES

ISRAT JAHAN

Elders and Indigenous community members feel the school curriculum is failing in fostering a sense of pride among indigenous children about their identity. Indigenous languages, culture, heritage and the teachings of Elders should be part of the school curriculum. Jonathan Kaiswatum emphasizes that language is the vehicle for cultural survival and fostering a sense of belonging and identity among the indigenous peoples. He further stressed that schools have a responsibility in preserving and teaching traditional languages. It is important that children see themselves reflected in their education and surroundings, which is not happening currently in schools in Canada for Indigenous children. Similarly, David Bearspaw said "We should not leave our identity at home. It is part of who we are." In fact, this absence of accommodating Indigenous identities in schools has been felt by generations of Indigenous peoples. Debbie Smith further affirmed this point noting that her own Indigenous heritage was recognized just once on the day of graduation:

"The one time my culture was recognized was on my graduation day with the honour song. Not once had learned about my people whose lands we live on today."

-Debbie Smith

All the Indigenous scholars and leaders present at the gathering emphasized the importance of building knowledge and pride for Indigenous identity. Dr. Teena Starlight exclaimed that there is a sense of urgency among Indigenous communities to reclaim Indigenous education by integrating language, culture, and traditional knowledge into the curriculum and pedagogy. She emphasized the importance of immersive and experiential approaches to language learning and land-based education for fostering deeper connections with indigenous identity and culture, rather than passive classroom instruction. Similarly, Cora-Lee Starlight-Cappo emphasized the importance of addressing not only the cultural aspects of Indigenous life but also the social justice component-recognizing and validating the daily struggles of Indigenous youth, including racism, mental health issues, and identity challenges. She further stressed the importance of teaching students about Indigenous ways of knowing and worldviews to help young people understand their place in society and foster relationship-building across cultural divides. Elder Jackie Bromley said, "I see education as the thing that connects the indigenous children with their ancestors". Elder Dr. Bruce Starlight drew everyone's attention to the fact that all that Elders, parents and community members from different First Nations want is the Indigenous children to be proud of their own identity and culture. He shares his deep sadness on how he sees Indigenous children not being able to speak their own languages, not being able to know and be proud of their own history and culture. He demands criticality and truth from what is taught in schools, because Canada's history is Indigenous history, and he questions why then the Indigenous children do not speak of their own communities when they speak of Canadian history. He points out that there is so much missing from the school curriculum regarding Indigenous history, heritage, wisdom and rich culture, and it is time now that these gaps are filled.

ELABORATION OF WITNESSING

STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS IDENTITIES THROUGH INTERGENERATIONAL CONNECTEDNESS

KOFI (JOSEPH) DARKWA & TATYANA KIM

Stories unfolded, each carrying the weight of generations. Elders, including Dr. Reggie Crowshoe, spoke of a time when knowledge was passed down through oral stories, not written words, and how the imposition of Western systems has threatened that transmission. They reminded us that Indigenous knowledge is not lesser; it should not have to fight for equality, because it has always stood equal. As Dr. Bruce Starlight outlined, Indigenous children return from school without seeing their own communities reflected in their lessons, learning histories that do not include their ancestors. I saw the deep pain shared by Evelyn Camille, Dianna Starlight, and Jackie Bromley, who, before being taken to residential schools, had been immersed in their traditions, only to have them stripped away.

Yet, through these stories, there was also a call to action - a recognition that the survival of Indigenous languages, knowledges, cultures, and values depends on intergenerational connectedness. As Dr. Teena Starlight and Debbie Smith pointed out, Elders play a central role, not just as knowledge keepers, but as anchors of identity, guiding young people back to who they are. Jonathan Kaiswatum further stressed that to strengthen Indigenous identity, children should not only learn the Western world but must also be given the chance to reclaim their own, walking "a path guided by the wisdom of ancestors" at their side.

SYSTEMIC BARRIERS MUST BE ADDRESSED

TAHMINA HOQ

The stories that were shared over the two days were not just memories from the past, but a reflection of the ongoing struggles faced by Indigenous students today. David Bearspaw shared how his children faced low expectations and stereotypes in school, with educators often blaming Indigenous students for their struggles rather than addressing the systemic racism that perpetuates these challenges. The lack of adequate funding was another barrier that stood out. Dr. Bruce Starlight spoke passionately about how the province views First Nations education as a federal responsibility, leaving resources to improve the education of First Nations students underfunded and under-resourced. He pointed out that while billions of dollars are generated from resources taken from Indigenous lands, only a fraction trickles down to support Indigenous education.

The stories of Debbie Smith and Dr. Teena Starlight further highlighted the impact of these systemic barriers. Debbie shared how her Indigenous identity was only acknowledged once during her entire nursing education-on the day of her graduation. She now advocates for integrating Indigenous knowledge into healthcare education, but the lack of funding and institutional support makes this an uphill battle. Dr. Teena Starlight spoke of the struggle to reclaim Indigenous education, emphasizing that without adequate resources, Indigenous communities cannot develop the curricula and programs needed to empower their youth. These stories are not just about challenges; they are also about resilience and the urgent need for change. As Elder Dr. Reggie Crowshoe reminded us, Indigenous knowledge is not inferior-it is equal, and it deserves equal respect and resources. The systemic barriers of racism and inadequate funding must be dismantled to create an education system where First Nations children can thrive, rooted in their cultures and languages, and guided by the wisdom of their ancestors.

STEPS MOVING FORWARD: CALLS TO ACTION

WHEREAS; the Government of Alberta must create a curriculum where First Nation Elders and Education Directors directly shape how their unique cultures, values, traditions, and languages will find expression in K-12 curriculum documents.

AND WHEREAS; the Government of Alberta must create a K-12 curriculum that acknowledges and recognizes the true and full history surrounding the issues, experiences, and contributions of First Nations people to Alberta and Canada.

AND WHEREAS; the Government of Alberta must recognize and understand Indigenous Knowledge Systems within the curriculum in ways that center Elder-guided land-based ways, honours, and respects oral traditions, lived experiences, and holistic ways of knowing and being.

AND WHEREAS; the Government of Alberta must create a K-12 curriculum framework where First Nations children can develop a sense of pride in their identity and non-First Nations children can understand the importance and significance of First Nations cultures, traditions, and knowledge systems.

AND WHEREAS; the Government of Alberta must recognize the home and community teachings of First Nations children and youth as a valuable source of knowledge that has an important place in the classroom.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED: the Government of Alberta must positively collaborate with First Nations communities to build meaningful relationships that ensure the removal of systemic barriers in the curricula and classroom so that all students can thrive emotionally and academically.



Agreed and supported by:

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