



INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

A Thriving FMPSD Priority

By Kiran Malik-Khan, Communications, Fort McMurray Public School Division

“I loved the teepee, the smell of the fire and the stories. I felt like I was home.” For Michael Gambler Gilks, a grade 6 student at Thickwood Heights Public School, participating in the Fish Teachings land-based camp was an unforgettable experience.

Fort McMurray Public School Division’s (FMPSD) thriving priority - Indigenous Education, and aligning activities are a difference-maker for our students as evidenced by the statement above.

We’re home to 690 Indigenous students, which is 9.99% of our enrollment. Land-based learning has been a huge hit across the Division. Thus far, we’ve hosted a Hide Camp, Beaver Camp, and recently Fish Teachings plus a fall and winter camp for high schoolers exclusively. Local Elders, and Knowledge-Keepers were engaged to help students and staff learn about Indigenous ways, and their own heritage.

Shirley-Ann Oldnall, grade 4 teacher at Thickwood Heights accompanied students from six FMPSD schools to the Fish Teachings camp, and was deeply moved by the experience.

“The demonstration was informative, peppered with anecdotes, advice on how to fillet and cook fish. Students hung onto every word. The camp was also an excellent example of how nothing is wasted, every bit of the fish is used,” noted Shirley-Ann, who has been with FMPSD for seven years.

“Because FMPSD makes Indigenous Education a priority, this is the generation that is learning to honour the truth of Canada’s history and also learning to bridge the gap between truth and reconciliation. By raising

the understanding of Indigenous history and acknowledging the truth and consequences of that history, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous aspirations for restorative justice are furthered. It can be argued that school is the epicentre of society and wields great power to influence, impact and inspire; therefore making Indigenous Education a priority is really an investment in all of our futures,” she added.

A champion of Indigenous Education, Annalee Nutter, Superintendent, FMPSD spoke to the program’s significance.

“From our Elders’ Council launched last year to a robust land-based learning program, our Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are embracing their identities and learning of our country’s history. We are mindfully planning, implementing activities, events, and learnings. Truth and Reconciliation requires action, and FMPSD is doing just that.”

Speaking of action, FMPSD, Fort McMurray Catholic Schools and Northland School Division came together on May 18, 2022 to celebrate the 25th annual Traditional Celebration of Achievement at Keyano Theatre. The beautiful event recognized and honoured First Nations, Métis, and Inuit graduates featuring students from Fort McMurray, Fort Chipewyan, Fort McKay, Anzac, Janvier, and Conklin, and saw 26 FMPSD Indigenous grads.

In early May, Indigenous students from École McTavish High School participated in FMPSD’s first-ever Dene Hand Games tournament in High Prairie. They placed fifth out of 15 teams returning with incredible memories.

Sage Mitchell, FMPSD’s Indigenous Student Services Cultural Teacher, accompanied the students to the Dene Hand Games, and was excited for the opportunity.

“Our students worked hard with Coach Matthew Shewchuk on learning traditional Dene Hand Games. Many of our students took this opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the culture. Our students were respectful of the cultural traditions while in High Prairie and received many compliments from members of that First Nation. Many participants were eager to teach the Games to more students for next year. Even though our students didn’t win, they did so well for their first time and gained a deeper connection to the culture, which is truly what matters!”

Rayman Stelmack, a grade 12 McTavish student participated in the Games. He felt the tournament “helped build a sense of my Indigenous identity; and learn more about historical arts that often go unrecognized and under-represented in the broader Canadian culture.”

“The Games are simply yet passionately designed, relying heavily on observation, group coordination and teamwork. This made it easy for all of us to follow; and fall in love with. Overall I had a blast, and hope that in the future I have further opportunities to participate. Thank you!” Rayman adeed.

Helping “build a sense of Indigenous identity,” as we are Doing What’s Best for Kids. For more information, visit: fmpsdschools.ca. Follow us on Twitter/Instagram: @FMPSD. Like us on Facebook: FMPSD. ■

Photos, left to right: McTavish students engrossed in the Games. (Rayman Stelmack is second from the right). Fish Teachings: Thickwood students enjoying Fish Teachings Camp. **Photos supplied**