

PADDLING TOGETHER:

RECONCILIATION IN ACTION AT ÉCOLE PHOENIX MIDDLE SCHOOL

Two years ago, I transitioned into the role of Principal at École Phoenix Middle School in School District No. 72 (Campbell River), where I had previously served as Vice-Principal for four years. This transition was enriched by the strong familiarity and shared commitment to our Student Achievement Plan, focused on Belonging, Hope, and Achievement. Our district's focus on reconciliation, guided by the leadership of our Indigenous Director of Education, Debra Martel, became central to our collective work. Debra's mentorship played a critical role in my own learning, teaching me to listen deeply, reflect thoughtfully, and take meaningful action.

Debra's leadership in conducting a district-wide equity scan and the adoption of the Grandmother Perspective¹ data collection were pivotal in shaping our school's approach to reconciliatory action. These initiatives, and Debra's vision for the District Indigenous Department, sparked important conversations and actions around supporting the well-

being and academic success of Indigenous students, forming the foundation for our Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP).

The concept of *nogé* in Kwakwaka is multifaceted, encompassing the ideas of heart, thoughts, knowledge, and decisions. It reflects a deep, holistic understanding of a person's inner being and the processes through which they make decisions, reflect on their thoughts, and hold knowledge. *Nogé* is connected to the core of a person — both intellectually and emotionally — and can refer to their mindset, intentions, and wisdom. Its meaning changes based on context, reflecting a layered depth of understanding. Similarly, the context in which educational leaders operate shapes the decisions they make in guiding their schools. This reflection on the journey of developing a RAP at École Phoenix Middle School aims to offer insights and guidance to other educational leaders navigating the complexities of fostering actions that meaningfully contribute to reconciliation within their unique school environments. A RAP as a specific framework originates from the work of Reconciliation Australia; in 2006, they publicly shared their practical planning framework to help organizations explore how to advance reconciliatory actions by embedding principles of respect, opportunity, and relationship into their own learning organizations. In schools, engaging with the RAP principles in a contextually relevant way can promote actions for equity that not only support Indigenous students, but foster a broader awareness and respect for Indigenous cultures, histories, and contributions.

¹ Introduced as a framework by BC's Office of the Human Rights Commissioner (BCOHRC) in their September 2020 report "Disaggregated demographic data collection in British Columbia: The grandmother perspective", with acknowledgement to Gwen Phillips of the Ktunaxa Nation and the BC First Nations Data Governance Initiative.

by
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PRINCIPLES

1. Commitment to Reconciliation through Leadership

As an educational leader, my role in the development and implementation of a RAP was essential, in that I had an opportunity to model for our team the orientation of a leader who listens deeply and identifies as a learner when engaging our Indigenous staff, students and community rightsholders, and knowledge keepers. Reconciliation cannot be achieved through passive support; it requires active, visible leadership. Our school's success in embedding reconciliation principles into everyday practices was made possible by our strong commitment to this work, driven by both data and a willingness to learn from the Indigenous communities we serve. Leadership means championing reconciliation not only by directing initiatives but also by engaging with Indigenous community members, creating partnerships, and fostering respect.

2. Data-Driven Actions and Student Success

Understanding the experiences of Indigenous students within our school required a nuanced approach. We initiated a data collection process that involved a wide range of educators and support staff, including Indigenous Youth Workers, counsellors, and academic support teachers. This collective audit revealed gaps in school connectedness, which we prioritized in our RAP. Our focus became the promotion of student belonging and the fostering of hope, using measurable outcomes such as attendance, student well-being, and academic achievement to track progress.





"All learning comes through relationships, and understanding local protocols is essential to fostering those connections. By involving our students in learning the protocols of gifting, inviting, listening to understand, and honouring our local Indigenous knowledge keepers, we are not only deepening our cultural awareness but also building trust within our school and community."

Tami Johnson
Indigenous Youth Worker
École Phoenix Middle School

3. Building Relationships, Kinship and Respect for Indigenous Perspectives

True reconciliation involves not just actions but a deep understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems, worldviews, and values. We sought to build genuine, reciprocal relationships with Indigenous Elders and communities, ensuring their perspectives were central in our planning. This relationship-building was extended to students and staff, in the spirit of creating a learning environment that was culturally safe, inclusive, and reflective of Indigenous traditions. This involved creating opportunities for Elders to be engaged in school life, integrating Indigenous perspectives into our curriculum, and designing culturally responsive school spaces.

4. Ongoing Engagement and Cultural Safety

The process of reconciliation is an ongoing journey, not a one-time initiative. At École Phoenix Middle School, we recognized the importance of continued learning and growth, both for our students and staff. This was embodied in our professional development activities, such as the transformative cultural immersion experiences with local Indigenous communities, and the inclusion of cultural safety in our school's environment. Furthermore, we prioritized the creation of spaces that were conducive to reflection, healing, and celebration, ensuring that Indigenous students felt supported in their identity and connected to their culture.

CONCLUSION

At École Phoenix Middle School, the Reconciliation Action Plan has evolved to become a vital part of our educational mission. We have learned that reconciliation is not a singular event but a continuous process of learning, unlearning, and rebuilding relationships. By centering Indigenous voices in decision-making, integrating Indigenous perspectives into our curriculum, and committing to long-term, data-driven actions, we strive to create a school environment where every student — Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike — feels seen, heard, and valued. Our hope is that through these efforts, we can foster a sense of belonging, resilience, and cultural pride in our students, empowering them to embrace their full potential and contribute meaningfully to society. Reconciliation, for us, is not just a goal; it is an ongoing action that shapes the present and future of our school community.