

# First Nations Education in the Greater Victoria District, B.C.<sup>1</sup>

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## *My Heart Soars*

*O, great Spirit!  
Give me back the courage of the olden Chiefs.  
Let me humbly accept this new culture  
and trough it rise up and go on.  
Like the thunderbird of the old,  
I shall rise again out of the sea;  
I shall grab the instruments of the  
white man's success ..... his education, his skills.  
With these new tools I shall build my race  
into the proudest segment of our society.  
I shall see our young braves and our chiefs  
sitting in the houses of law and government  
ruling and being ruled  
by the knowledge and freedoms of our great land.*

*(by Chief Dan George)*

## History of the Native Studies Program

In the fall of 1979, with strong school district support, our First Nation teachers were hired to implement the first Native Studies program in the Greater Victoria School District. They were Ed Tatoosh (Nuu chah nulth Language), Freda Shaughnessy (Kwakwala Language), George Hunt Jr. (First Nations Art) and Nella Nelson (History). Denis St. Claire was hired as the Department Head of the S.J. Willis Native Studies Program. Extensive research was done in the ethnographic collection of the Provincial museum, and three classroom areas were transformed into teaching areas with strong traditional

presence with D-adzed cedar walls, First Nations historical art work and pictures, a longhouse centre, and display cases decorating the walls. The Native Education Centre had been created and was open for all students.

The program attracted a large number of students during its first year of operation. The program became the practicum site for the University of Victoria's linguistic program. The students benefitted from having elders like Peter Webster (Nuu chah nulth), and John Thomas (Nitinaht) in the classroom. The S.J. Willis First Nations Centre was the host to many visitors as they came to observe the program in action. The program then outreached to elementary and secondary schools, as students would come to take the courses at the school. The programs were viewed as something special and something that students wanted to be part of.

The programs operated very successfully at S.J. Willis for four years. During that time a needs assessment was initiated by the United Native Nations, and an agreement was made to develop a Native Indian Education Division in the school district to deal with the high dropout rate and the need for increased Native curriculum in the public school system. Marie Cooper was hired as Native Indian Education Coordinator at the district level, and, due to declining enrolment, S.J. Willis closed as a junior high school. This closure resulted in a re-organization of the Native Education Programs with the staff moving to a variety of schools, and in the official dismantling of the Native Education Centre.

### **The Native Indian Education Council of Greater Victoria**

Historically, the Greater Victoria School district did not offer culturally relevant programs for First Nations students, and there was a concern expressed by the first Nations community to develop and implement cultural awareness programs for the public schools. In 1977, the Victoria Native Friendship Centre responded to the concerns expressed by the community, and hired an Education Counselling Coordinator and two staff to facilitate the delivery of First Nation Awareness to Greater Victoria Schools. These positions were funded through a Canada Manpower Program. The program ran for three years, then the United Native Nations met with Executive Director, Butch Dick, from the Victoria Native Friendship Centre to discuss the cultural and educational needs of our students and the 95% drop-out rate.

From this meeting there evolved a need to formalize a process to review the cultural and educational needs of the students in the Greater Victoria area.

The Victoria Native Indian Education Commission began as a response to the high drop-out rate and the difficulties that Indian students faced in the Greater Victoria public school system. The educational and cultural needs of our students were not being met in the district schools, nor was there any organized body to formally assess those needs, and to assist in the development of programs to meet the cultural, academic and social needs of our students. The situation required a coordinated approach with a central organizing authority for the development of Indian Education programs in the district.

In May 1979, the Victoria Native Indian Education Commission was formed. The Commission brought about the first systematic review of the public education provided to our students in the Greater Victoria School District and led to the formal establishment of the Native Indian Education Division. This division became responsible for developing and implementing programs that were culturally relevant for urban students in the school district.

In April 1982, the Victoria Native Indian Education Council was elected to succeed the Commission as a formal representative body to the Greater Victoria School District. The principal goal of the Indian Education Council was to ensure direct Indian Community involvement in the policy and planning process for Indian Education Programs in the Greater Victoria School District. The Council was composed of six elected directors (voting), one honorary life-time director (voting), six non-voting tribal/native organization appointees (from the Kwagiulth District Council, Nuu chah nulth District Council, Songhees First Nations, Esquimalt First Nations, United Native Nations, Vancouver Island Métis Association), four non-voting trustees from the Greater Victoria School Board, and one non-voting honorary director. Council meetings were held monthly. The aims were (1) to provide elected representation and collective direction for our Native Indian community in the development of appropriate Native Indian Education programs in the public schools of School District #61, and (2) to serve as a liaison between the Greater Victoria School District and the Native Indian community.

## **First Nations Education Division (F.N.E.D)**

The development, administration and coordination of the First Nations Education Division at the Greater Victoria School District is unique. The philosophy of First Nations education and the cultural values of our First Nations community requires a collective and interdisciplinary approach to policy, programs, curriculum development, implementation and staff development. As a result, a series of special working relationships have evolved within the school district and the local First Nations community.

The First Nations Education Division, the First Nations Parent Advisory Council, First Nations community and the Greater Victoria School District are jointly involved in delivery of the First Nations Programs to our students. First Nations Education (FNED) is responsible for implementing the First Nations Education philosophy and policies established by the district and community. In addition two representatives are selected from the School Board of Trustees to work as liaison with FNED.

The FNED staff is composed of twenty-three people who work as First Nations Studies teachers, First Nations Skill Development teachers, First Nations district counsellors, First Nations Art/Culture teachers, and First Nations teacher assistants. Out of a staff of twenty-three, twenty have First Nations ancestry and represent a diverse range of First Nations people. The FNED staff offer concentrated First Nations cultural programs in seventeen schools, and support additional cultural awareness programs in many others.

The First Nations Education Division has the autonomy to develop the budget, assess program needs, hire and allocate staff. The development of curriculum has been a strong focus for FNED over the past six years, and has resulted in a wide variety of curricular resources from Kindergarten to Grade 12.

## **First Nations Education program overview**

The First Nations Education Division operates its programs on the traditional territory of Songhees and Esquimalt Nations. The Greater Victoria School District has a general student population of approximately 23,000 students. First Nations students number 1,140 (4%), and there are 127 First Nations students funded through the Federal Government and the Local Education Agreements: Songhees Nation: 85; Esquimalt Nation: 25; Boarding Home students (DIA-sponsored): 9.

The Esquimalt Nation and the Greater Victoria School District signed their first Local Education Agreement in the 1995–96 school year, and are still in the process of negotiating the 1997–98 Agreement. The Songhees Nation is in the process of negotiating a Local Education Agreement with the School District to cover the 1997/98 school year. A total of 955 students come under the General Provincial Funding category, and are not attached to a First Nations band for funding. The three main island nations that we service in the Greater Victoria School District are: Coast Salish, Nuuchalch, and Kwakwaka'wakw.

### **Local education agreement**

In April 1995, the Department of Northern & Indian Affairs sent a letter to all Indian Bands in Canada offering them the opportunity to channel their Master Tuition funds directly to their bands. It was stated in this letter that by September 1996, all Indian Bands would have control of their Master Tuition funds, and that they would negotiate their own agreements with their local school districts. The Esquimalt Nation opted to have their funds transferred directly to them for the 1995–96 school year, and the Songhees Nation followed the same option for the 1996–97 school year.

Historically, under the old Master Tuition Agreement, the Federal Government paid the Provincial government for the education of “Status On Reserve” children in the public schools. With the development of the Local Education Agreements, the Federal government will transfer the money directly to the bands. The bands will then begin the process of negotiating agreements for delivery and payment of educational services with their local school district.

The L.E.A. (Local Education Agreement) will be an agreement between a school board and the council of a Band which specifies the educational services the Band will pay the school board to provide for its “Status On Reserve” children. These funds cover the basic instructional costs for the education of “Status On Reserve” students, and does not include special education funding.

In the Greater Victoria School District, we have 1,140 students with First Nations ancestry, with approximately 122 students coming under the “Status on Reserve” category. There are 85 “Status on Reserve” students registered

with the Songhees Nation; 25 with the Esquimalt Nation, nine with the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation, and three with other nations. The Greater Victoria School District is currently in the process of negotiating a Local Education Agreement with the Esquimalt Nation, and with the Songhees Nation.

### **Government of British Columbia First Nations Education Policy**

The current policy of the Ministry of Education supports the recommendations of the Sullivan Commission. The major elements of the policy are: To support the aboriginal education learners, the Ministry of Education has established the following guidelines:

#### Ministry of Education:

- Increasing the relevance and responsiveness of the school system to First Nations students;
- Increasing awareness of First Nations culture among all learners;
- Helping ensure that First Nations children retain and reserve their linguistic and cultural heritage;
- helping to ensure parity of achievement for First Nations students in the public school system.

#### School boards:

- Developing timelines for school and district Native education activities;
- reviewing district Native education practices and policies;
- encouraging the development of new programs to increase the awareness of all students about First Nations history and culture;
- assessing allocation of resources;
- where local agreements exist, establishing contracts with Bands and Councils;
- establishing Native advisory committees to develop/review district policies.

#### School personnel:

- Becoming involved in culture awareness training and activities;
- using, where appropriate, locally-developed Native Education curriculum resource materials;
- reviewing school practices;
- increasing staff/student awareness of First Nations history and culture;

- reviewing results of First Nations students on evaluations, and developing action plans.

In response to discussions at a First Nations Federal/Provincial Tripartite meeting February 14–15, 1995, the province developed a report titled: “Principles for Funding Aboriginal Education”. The report, written by the Ministry of Finance & Corporate Relations, and the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, and dated March 20, 1995, established the province’s position on education funding for First Nations, as follows:

- British Columbia is committed to working with the Federal Government and First Nations Education to ensure that First Nations receive equitable levels of education funding and access to the provincial education system;
- Provincial services are generally provided on the basis of need, not on a user-pay basis, and provincial taxes are determined on the basis of the ability to pay. There is no direct link between the level of service individuals receive and the amount of taxes they pay.
- Canada has the fiduciary responsibility for the education of status Indians, and must provide funding for status Indians on an equitable basis throughout Canada.

### **First Nations Skill Development Program**

The First Nations Skill Development Program has been developed and implemented to provide culturally based academic and individual support to First Nations students with academic, cultural and emotional needs.

The First Nations Skill Development Program reflects our philosophy of First Nations education which recognizes that all students have the capacity to grow, develop and change, and that our learning environments must provide the foundation for this growth.

The First Nations Skill Development Program operates within six schools in the Greater Victoria School District. Each program has a certified teacher who has expertise in the areas of:

- offering direct or indirect educational and cultural support to First Nations students;
- assessing learning strengths and weaknesses;
- individual or small group instruction and advocacy;

- working closely with the First Nations counsellor and First Nations art teacher to develop relevant programs.

The teacher assistants attached to each of the Skill Development Programs have the following roles:

- assisting with the teaching of First Nations culture/heritage, life skills and socialization;
- assisting teachers in helping students in the academic areas;
- acting as role models and cultural interpreter;
- working as liaisons with the First Nations counsellors, First Nations Art teachers and the general school population.

The First Nation Skill Development programs are developed and implemented to reflect the individual needs of the schools in which they are located. The teaching of academic skills is supplemented by both cultural and contemporary resources. The focus of the programs is to create a sense of place and belonging for first Nations students in the urban school setting, and to lay a foundation for success. Every effort is made to make school a positive place to be for First Nation students. High expectations and respect for each individual student will encourage success in many forms.

### **First Nations Art/Culture Program**

The First Nations Art program was initially started in 1978 at S.J. Willis Junior High School as part of the Native Studies Program. The development of this program was initiated by Denis St. Clair and members of the First Nations community. There was a strong belief that the art and culture of the First Nations people needed to be an integral part of the curriculum for all students. The incorporation of Native Art, Social Studies and Language would provide a strong foundation for Native students in the urban environment, and would address the lack of Native curriculum content in the provincial curriculum.

The elementary level First Nations Art course introduces students to the basic composition of two and three dimensional West Coast First Nations Art with a strong focus on the Coast Salish, Nuuchahmuls and Kwagiwiltz art styles. Students develop the vocabulary and the history associated with

the art style. Students are actively involved in the design and production of their own work.

The secondary level program of First Nation Art introduces students to Coast Salish, Nuu chah nulth and Kwakiulth art styles, focusing on the similarities and differences in style. The students review the historical and contemporary context of First Nations culture as it relates to the art. Students are encouraged to expand their knowledge about materials, tools and techniques which have been developed and used by First Nations artists. At the secondary level they also expand their research base into First Nations cultures throughout Canada and North America.

Goals of the First Nations Art/Culture Course:

- to integrate the curriculum strands of First Nation Studies, First Nations Art, Fine Arts, practical arts, sciences, language and humanities;
- to create positive awareness of First Nations cultures through First Nations art and art projects;
- to develop and improve basic knowledge of first Nation design, drawing and painting through active participation in the lessons;
- to utilize cultural education to strengthen a person's identity as a member of their cultural community;
- to aid all children in acquiring an understanding and appreciation of a truly unique, complex art form;
- to explore dimensions of First Nations art as a total cultural expression.

### **First Nations Full Day Kindergarten Program**

In September 1989, a new kindergarten program was opened to respond to the evident need of pre-school children of First Nations heritage who lived in the Greater Victoria area. The program is one that not only the children, but the First Nations community and the Greater Victoria School Board regards with great pride.

The FNED Kindergarten strives to provide a program that focuses not on weakness or deficits, but utilizes the strengths and advantages of our First Nations children. Such a program enriches the lives of our young students and in turn, the life of the larger community.

The program strives to equip the children with skills which will assist them to face the realities of the world in which they live. The culturally supportive context and process supports them as First Nations children, while the experience of the formal socialization and the efforts to include the children in the broader community of the school softens the predictable culture shock of school entry.

The First Nations Kindergarten teacher and First Nations Assistant endeavour to provide a positive, nurturing environment for First Nations students. Elders, parents and community members are encouraged to be involved in the program and to provide a learning experience that is integrated with First Nations culture, history and heritage.

This is a full day thematic program that operates with 15 students. The program is supported by a teacher, a teacher assistant, a First Nation art teacher and a First Nations district counsellor.

### **First Nations Cultural Awareness Program**

FNED also provides First Nations Awareness sessions to schools in the Greater Victoria School District. These sessions focus on First Nations art, culture, legends and history, and provide schools with the opportunity to have local First Nations community members in the classroom as an additional resource. These awareness classes are offered on a one- to six-session mini contract basis. Formal requests are forwarded to the FNED office on the First Nations Awareness request form. This program provides us with the opportunity to provide support to schools that have a lower First Nations population and do not have a regular First Nations program in operation.

### **First Nations District Counsellors**

The First Nations student population of the Greater Victoria School District is diverse, with many families moving to the urban area for education, health, employment and family reasons. Included in the student population are students from the local Songhees and Esquimalt Nations.

The role of individual First Nations District Counsellors is influenced by the needs of each program, school, and the local First Nations community.

The counsellors strive to provide a holistic balanced approach for service delivery to students, providing support in the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual areas. The FN District counsellor provides students with the opportunity to gain insight into personal issues, and to facilitate the development of strategies that will enhance their personal, social, cultural and educational development. The counsellors work very closely with the School Services Team, teachers, parents and the community to meet the needs of the students in their area.

Each District counsellor works hard to support, promote and highlight positive educational experiences for our First Nations students, parents, schools and community. It is critical to celebrate and acknowledge the positive aspects of a student's school experience, and to invite the community in to participate with the student and the school.

### **First Nations Studies Teachers**

The initial First Nations Studies program was launched at S.J. Willis Junior High School in 1978 to address the needs of the First Nations students in urban Victoria. The program was initiated by Denis St. Clair and the first Nations parents and community to provide a social studies program that acknowledged and validated the history of the Native people in a historical and contemporary context.

Currently, the first Nations Studies Program has branched out to four high schools, and is being taught at various grade levels. The First Nations History courses have been developed to provide all students with a systematic, balanced view of events and issues on history as they relate to pre-contact and contemporary Canada and North America. Special attention is given to the history of the local and regional First Nations in British Columbia.

FNED has developed a variety of curricula resources to support the First Nations studies programs at the secondary level, and to incorporate it into the provincial curriculum.

The recent development of the Ministry of Education's B.C. First Nations Studies 12 course has expanded the academic offerings for students at the secondary level. This is a provincially prescribed elective course, suitable for all students.

The course is primarily British Columbia focused, emphasizing the traditions and history of B.C, First Nations, and is taught at Esquimalt Secondary, Victoria High School and the Continuing Education program.

### **First Nations Leadership Course**

From 1990 to 1993, the First Nations Education Division accessed funds from the Federal At-Risk Program to provide support and programs for our First Nations students who were at risk of dropping out of school. Shane Pointe was hired as facilitator for the program, and after discussions with other FNED staff members, it was decided that START would deliver programs that focused on providing opportunities for our young people to develop healthy leadership skills.

The program operated in a number of elementary and secondary schools for two years before the funding expired. Some of our FNED staff members co-facilitated the program with Shane, and were therefore able to continue the First Nations Leadership Program after we had lost the funding. The delivery of the course focuses on First Nations Young People Becoming Healthy Leaders for Today and Tomorrow, with special emphasis on using the First Nations tradition of balancing healthy spirit, emotions, mind and body. It is designed to help young people live a healthy principle-based life. The course is currently being taught at four schools in our district, and is being delivered with a strong emphasis on community participation.

FNED has recently developed and printed curriculum to support the First Nations Leadership Course, and has gone through the process of having the course recognized through Education Policy as a locally-developed course in the school district. It will now be taught as "First Nations Leadership 10 & 11."

The message given to the participants in the initial program by Shane was: "to encourage them as potential leaders not to miss the opportunity to grasp with both hands, as much formal education as possible. Remember that education is dynamic. Be flexible in adapting to new situations and use all your senses; listening, seeing, smelling, tasting and touching. These are essential for a full life."

**Notes**

1) This paper is based on the First Nations Education Handbook (Greater Victoria School District), First Edition, April 1998. First Nations Education Division. Victoria.



**First Nations Education**