

“S’I’e’heh “–The Learning Spirit is in All Us

Celebrating the Gifts of Every Child

Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre in partnership with the **Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District** gathered a group of individuals to explore ways to enhance the transition experience for Aboriginal children in their kindergarten year. The group was presented with the challenge of creating a vision and structure for students, educators, families and community members that would result in Aboriginal youth and their families feeling welcome, respected and successful.

The “Working Committee” included early childhood educators, school district administrators, Vancouver Island University project leaders, teachers, Elders and local community members. The initial phase of the project produced the **Qeq College Transition Year Plan** with rationale, context, goals, budget lines etc. Through a number of visioning activities and focused discussions the working group concluded that in order to make a significant and positive impact on the academic achievements for our Aboriginal youth, clear guidance and leadership was essential. As a result of these discussions the committee made a commitment to articulate our shared vision for young aboriginal learners by creating a **Curriculum Framework**.

Patricia Holborn, respected and accomplished education leader in the area of collaborative inquiry and early childhood education, agreed to work with us to create a document that could change practice by providing experiences more reflective of the interests, values and aspirations of Aboriginal families.

After two years of intense study, deep and thoughtful discussions, and input from many respected Elders, the project is now in the evaluation and reflection stage.

As a member of the committee I prepared for the evaluation stage of the project by reviewing the experience as well as the resulting document. I would like to respectively share the three principles that I believed shaped and guided all of our work.

Guiding Principle One

Our work was guided by the powerful wisdom embedded in the Hul'qui'minum word "**S'l'e'heh**". Committee member, Danielle Alphonse, brought the word forward early in our project work. She shared that Elders tell us to always be mindful of **the learning spirit in all of us**. **S'l'e'heh** teaches us to honour and know children from the perspective of their strengths and gifts.

The committee embraced the word because it directed and informed all of us who work with the very young about the importance of creating a sense of belonging and connectedness to family, community and the environment so that each child's learning spirit can thrive.

I believe the resulting document and the work accomplished to date reflects the concepts behind the sacred word

Guiding Principle Two

Over the two-year process, our work reflected the process ***of true collaborative work***. Pat Holborn, project leader, often started the Working Committee session with gentle reminders that this work can be "messy and challenging". Tolerance for different points of view is required. Her thoughtful guidance got us through some big issues. She told us that our success depends on learning from one another as we worked together. Focused conversations were the vehicle of choice for Pat. She never avoided conflict, and welcomed all ideas. She told us that it takes time to build an inclusive environment in which families, community, educators and students are equal partners, so patience is required. Everyone's voice is important, and community is built when connections are made.

She shaped the agenda and guided our conversations. She provided the platform to identify what really matters for Aboriginal students and families. She listened to the many voices at the table and followed through with a commitment to **weave the Elder's teachings into the entire document**.

Our focused conversations helped us articulate what really matters and what was necessary for young Aboriginal youth to succeed and thrive in the public school setting.

Each of our sessions started with Pat presenting the draft writing she completed after she had sifted through, organized and, identified our key ideas from the previous gathering. The phrases from our sharing/brainstorming/visioning activities were now organized into a coherent, reader friendly format. Relevant references and resources to support the document were included. The core values were matched with practical and easily implemented classroom strategies. This made the document teacher friendly and relevant to the classroom setting.

The working document was the result of collaboration and co-writing and reflects Pat Holborn's wealth of knowledge as well as the working committee member's backgrounds in education, leadership, early childhood development, action research, current assessment strategies and "strength-based" teaching. All were passionate about improving the school experience for Aboriginal learners and their families.

Guiding Principle Three

The third guiding principle was that it be a project created in the spirit of **sharing**. We worked side by side to produce a document that will **guide** but not prescribe rich learning experiences for young learners. The document will provide the foundation for thoughtful professional learning opportunities for educators and community programs. The scope of the Curriculum Framework provides support not only for the Qeq College Transition Kindergarten Year but to educators throughout the elementary years.

I raise my hands to thank **Grace Neilson and the Tillicum staff, Pat Holborn, the Nanaimo-Ladysmith School District, Vancouver Island University, the Elders and the community members** who worked together to contribute to the **Qeq College Program**.

The **Curriculum Framework** we will move rhetoric into reality. The Qeq College project embracing the beautiful Hul'q'uimi'num' word **S'l'e'heh**. The learning

spirit is in all of us, and as educators, we must always celebrate the gifts that each child brings.

In friendship,

Donna Klockars

Retired Literacy Coordinator-

Community member on the Working Committee

“The child must know that he is a miracle, that since the beginning of the world there hasn’t been, and until the end of the world there will not be, another child like him” Pablo Casals