

# *Creating Futures*

FALL/WINTER 2024-25

EXPLORE HOW SSDEC SCHOOLS ARE PRIORITIZING  
MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS, INTEGRATING INDIGENOUS  
PERSPECTIVES, AND TRANSFORMING EDUCATION THROUGH  
INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS.



# Creating Futures

A SOUTH SLAVE DIVISIONAL EDUCATION COUNCIL MAGAZINE

- 04 Nurturing Minds: Enhancing Mental Health and Wellness in Schools**  
*Discover how SSDEC schools are prioritizing student mental health and wellness through innovative programs, cultural integration, and dedicated wellness workers.*
- 08 A Collective Responsibility: Addressing Mental Health in Our Communities**  
*A message on the importance of addressing mental health as a collective responsibility, highlighting the need for supportive work environments and strategic planning to foster positive mental health and life-work balance.*
- 10 The Impact of NWT's Redesigned Curriculum: Transforming Literacy - Part 1**  
*Discover how the NWT's redesigned curriculum transforms literacy education by focusing on competency-based and inquiry-based learning, integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives to better prepare students for the future.*
- 13 The Impact of NWT's Redesigned Curriculum: Transforming STEAM - Part 2**  
*Discover how the NWT's redesigned curriculum transforms STEM education through practical skills, design thinking, and Indigenous perspectives, preparing students for future challenges and careers.*
- 16 Nurturing Identity: Benefits of Teaching Indigenous Languages in Schools**  
*Explore how teaching Indigenous languages at SSDEC schools fosters cultural pride, cognitive growth, and career opportunities, while addressing the historical impacts of colonization.*
- 18 Unlocking Potential: The Multidimensional Benefits of Bilingual Education**  
*Discover how bilingual education at JBT and PWK schools enriches students' cognitive, social, and economic lives, fostering personal growth and global citizenship.*
- 20 Spotlight Features: Inspiring Leaders and Voices of the SSDEC**  
*Meet Pennie Pokiak, Tiffany Kelly and Marlin Miersch-King who are shaping the future of education and cultural preservation in the NWT. From visionary leadership and storytelling to youth empowerment.*
- 24 A Logo for Our Future: Inspired by Our Students**  
*Explore the new SSDEC logo, crafted from student submissions, symbolizing our mission, values, and connection to Indigenous heritage. Each element reflects our commitment to progress, cultural pride, and educational excellence.*
- 26 Celebrating Achievements: SSDEC Students Shine at the 2024 Arctic Winter Games**  
*Explore the remarkable achievements of SSDEC students at the 2024 Arctic Winter Games, highlighting their participation in the Dene Games and the cultural significance of this traditional sport.*
- 30 Digital Wellness: Tips for a Safe Online Experience**  
*Explore essential cybersecurity tips to help teachers, students, and parents navigate the digital landscape securely.*



## Superintendent's Message

Ask Canadians to give our education system a score on a report card, and chances are you will get a failing grade. Browse the internet for articles about the state of our school system, and chances are that most articles will report bleak horizons for our students and the country's future.

That simply is not true.

It might surprise you to know that Canada is among the global leaders in Education, ranking 8th in the world, ahead of every European and Western countries. This is a testament to the quality of our education system. Finland, the perennial leader, ranked 12th, and the US and UK, our traditional measuring sticks, ranked 18th and 14th, respectively.

When discussing Canada's success in global rankings, Andreas Schleicher, the OECD's education director, doesn't just praise our position. He specifically lauds Canada's commitment to equity. This recognition from a global education authority underscores our reputation as a system that values equal access to education at all levels. From elementary to post-secondary education, we provide equal opportunities for children to succeed in school.

The work schools do in education truly matters. Every moment they dedicate to making a student's life better—whether through a simple gesture, a kind word, or our attentive support—has an impact. Their dedication to equity and creating opportunities for all students is why Canada continues to excel in global education rankings. And though the challenges are many, the difference they make is deeply appreciated—if not always openly, then certainly in the hearts of the students and communities they serve.

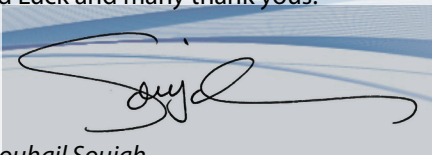
Their commitment to indigenizing education, levelling the playing field, and providing equal opportunities to all our students is why, as a division, we stand head and shoulders above others with many more resources, more time, and far fewer obstacles in their way.

As we prepare for another school year, I want to leave you with the words of Murray Sinclair as an anchor for our purpose:

*"Education will create knowledge, and from knowledge will come understanding. From understanding will come respect – both self-respect for Indigenous people and mutual respect for all!"*

I can think of no other words to exemplify the need for your support to lead us down the path of Reconciliation, and to provide the opportunity for all our kids to be successful, capable citizens.

Good Luck and many thank yous!



Dr. Souhail Soujah





## **Nurturing Minds**

### **Enhancing Mental Health and Wellness in Schools**

#### **Prioritizing Mental Health in Schools**

In recent years, schools have prioritized mental health and wellness for students. These priorities stem from an understanding that students spend most of their developmental years in school, where they concentrate on academics, socialize, communicate, manage emotions, and learn to build on their individual strengths. During this critical period, they also develop core values of respect and acceptance of others. For some students, however, additional interventions and a greater number of positive experiences are required to help them make healthy lifestyle choices and reach their potential.

#### **The Role of Teaching Staff and Wellness Workers**

Teaching staff are well-positioned to observe and guide students through difficult times and have done so for many years. However, sometimes this support is not enough. Wellness programming and the employment of school wellness workers can further aid children and youth in developing problem-solving skills and meeting social-emotional needs.

#### **Addressing Broader Influences and Challenges**

The negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, local disasters, effects of climate change, and social media influences have prompted schools across Canada to extend health and wellness education beyond isolated subject areas. NWT schools boast diversity of Indigenous cultures that, while wondrous and unique, have faced generations of challenges continuing to impact our students' lives today. Emotional support is clearly needed across all aspects of a student's day to support lifelong resilience and healthy lifestyle choices.

#### **Unique Opportunities in NWT Schools**

NWT schools, and particularly SSDEC schools, have unique contexts and opportunities to develop mental health and wellness programs. We have on-the-land learning programs, cultural camps, Elders in School programs, and community resource people to assist with local teachings and language acquisition. Additionally, our access to nature provides many opportunities for experiential learning, reinforcing concepts taught in both academic content and cultural teachings.





“ Emotional support is needed across all aspects of a student’s day to support lifelong resilience and healthy lifestyle choices. ”



## **Holistic Approach to Mental Health and Wellness**

A holistic approach to mental health and wellness within a safe and responsive climate will best serve our students. When wellness objectives are compartmentalized within specific courses, transference to actual lifestyle choices may not occur. Extending learning beyond classrooms to cover all aspects of students' lives throughout their school day will have a greater impact and increase the probability of internalizing skills and values.

## **The Importance of School Wellness Workers**

With the addition of school wellness workers to our staff, a more concentrated effort and focus on mental health and well-being can occur. School-based wellness workers can assist with prevention and intervention strategies to help students achieve their potential. Specifically, students can be supported in building resilience, developing self-confidence, attaining knowledge and skills to make healthy lifestyle choices, creating healthy relationships, learning values of respect and empathy, and becoming advocates for their own health needs. For those students who are considerably at risk, partnerships between Health and Education are necessary to address mental health concerns requiring clinical or therapeutic support.

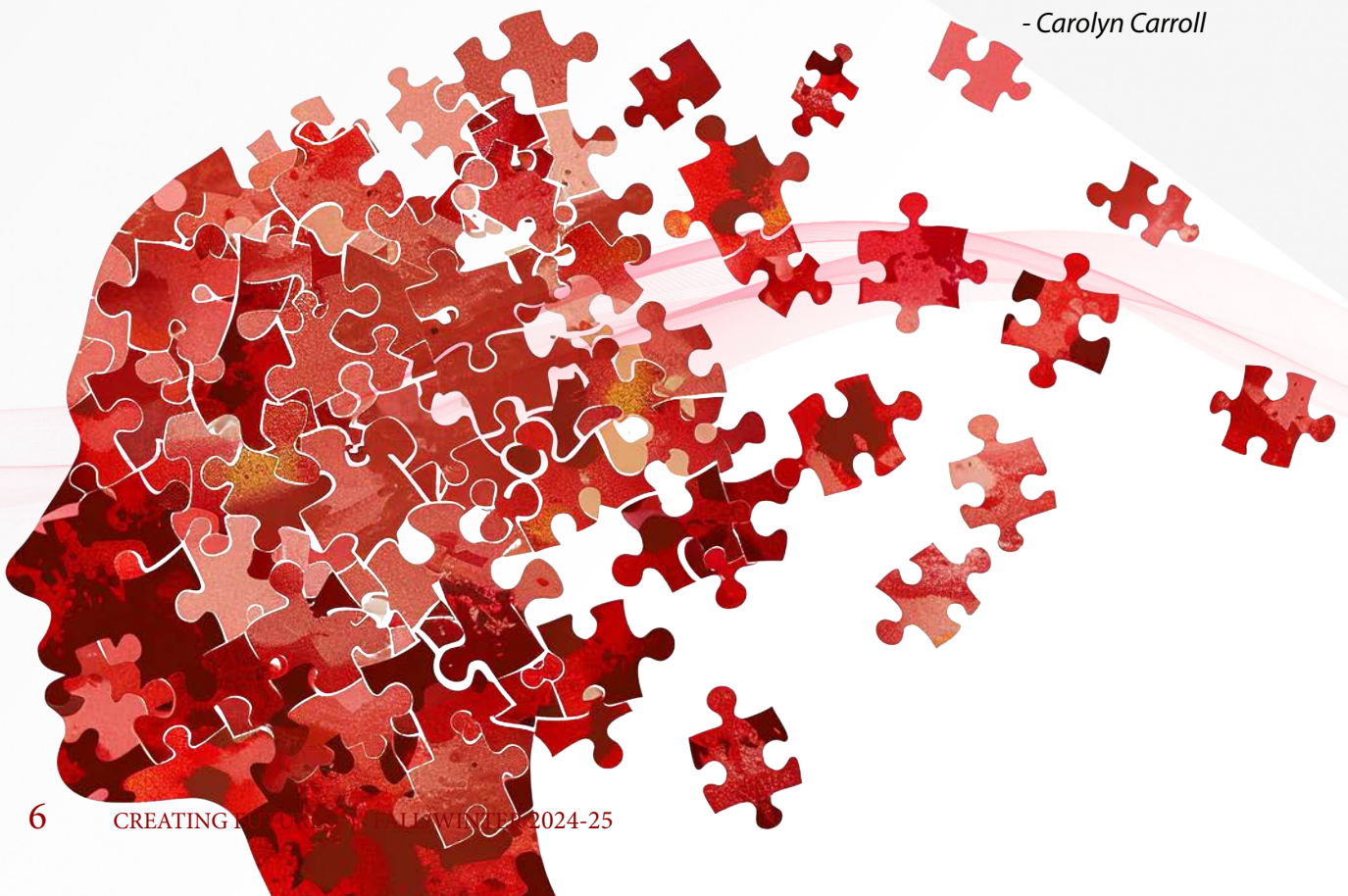
## **Universal Wellness Strategies in the Classroom**

Universal wellness strategies are taught in the classroom. Classroom-based lessons aim to promote positive behavioral and social-emotional skills. SSDEC schools will continue to have health programming and courses for all students in place to address mental health and wellness objectives. Additional support will also occur through more targeted interventions as needed. With interventions available throughout the whole school day, it is hoped that students will be more successful during and beyond their school years.

## **Partnerships for Optimal Student Success**

Although schools are the center for fostering positive mental health and well-being, partnerships with families, communities, and Health and Social Services are still needed to realize our vision. These partnerships are crucial to optimizing student success and providing them with the necessary skills and perseverance to successfully navigate their lives during and beyond the school years.

*- Carolyn Carroll*







# The Importance of Mental Health Awareness

Mental health is crucial for overall well-being and involves how we feel, think, act, and interact with the world around us. It is about realizing our potential, coping with normal stresses, and making contributions to our communities. While each person's path to mental well-being is unique, good mental health is achievable for everyone.

- Building self-esteem, positive support networks, getting involved, building resiliency, recognizing emotions, and taking care of spiritual well-being.
- Building self-esteem means accepting all of our abilities and weaknesses and using confidence to pursue goals and interests without comparing ourselves to others.
- Positive support networks, which can come from family, friends, or other important Supporters, offer emotional, practical, and alternate points of view.
- Being involved in things that matter provides a sense of purpose and satisfaction, connects us with others who share similar interests, and helps us learn new skills and build confidence.
- Developing resiliency skills like problem-solving, assertiveness, and developing support networks helps us cope well with problems, stress, and difficult situations.
- Recognizing emotions, expressing them in a way that respects everyone, and accepting all emotions, even difficult ones, is important for emotional well-being.



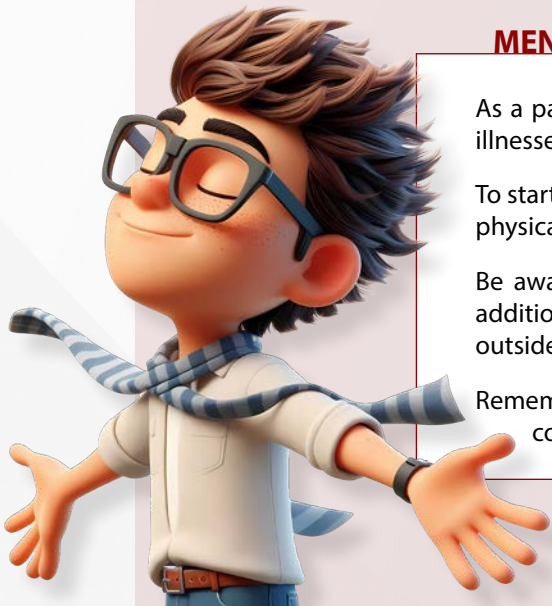
## MENTAL HEALTH TEEN TIPS

As a parent, it's important to talk to your teen about mental health. Many mental illnesses start during the teen years, and seeking help early can make a big difference.

To start the conversation, remind your teen that mental health is just as important as physical health, and that it's okay to have bad days or to ask for help.

Be aware of warning signs, and take your teen's concerns seriously. If they need additional support, offer alternatives like talking to a school counsellor or seeking outside help from a doctor or mental health professional.

Remember, you don't need to have all the answers, just be open, curious, and compassionate.



## DON'T HESITATE TO SEEK HELP!

If you are experiencing a crisis or extreme distress, don't hesitate to seek help! There are crisis lines available 24/7 that can provide immediate support.

### Government of Canada's Mental Health Services

Youth Helpline at 1-888-668-6810 or text **WELLNESS** to 686868

Adults Helpline at 1-866-585-0445 or text **WELLNESS** to 741741

### Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority

Youth Helpline at 1-800-668-6868 or text the word **TALK** to 686868

Adults Helpline at 1-800-661-0844







## A Collective Responsibility

### Addressing Mental Health in Our Communities

#### Understanding the Scope of Mental Health Issues

Consider these statistics: 1 in 8 men and 1 in 5 women report experiencing symptoms of mental health problems. Take a moment to think about the significance of these numbers. They may seem like a drop in the bucket, but if you extrapolate them to the populations in our communities—Hay River, Katlodeeche, Fort Resolution, Fort Smith, and Lutsel K'e—that's over 1,100 people reporting mental health struggles in a consistent, medically recognized diagnostic. To put things in perspective, you likely know one, perhaps more than one person who is, right now, doing their absolute best to keep their head above water. The worst part is that it could be happening right next to you, and you wouldn't know it. Or you would help. Right?





### **Mental Health: A Collective Duty**

We all want to help. Whether the person is a family member or a stranger, it's in our humanity to want to help, to alleviate someone's pain. Mental health is not a private responsibility. It's not a "your" problem. It's a collective duty for which we all need to take accountability. Consider that 50% of all employees report work to be a source of detriment to their mental health, and 38% cite burnout from stressful work environments. If these statistics don't convince you that mental health is an "us" problem, here's one more: mental health costs the Canadian economy billions of dollars every year.

### **Creating Supportive Work Environments**

Whether the humanitarian or economic argument convinces you, it's time to put effort and time into better work environments that foster positive mental health. This doesn't require grandiose overhauls or gestures but rather small, incremental, genuine changes in attitudes, practices, and policies that inch us toward fulfilling jobs that permit us to enjoy the balance needed to meet our personal and professional goals in life. Policies without enforcement are meaningless, gestures without authenticity are contrived, and practices without purpose are harmful. Let's not do what looks good but fails to address the core of our strife. Let's be true to ourselves and those under our charge.

### **Strategic Planning for Mental Health & Well-Being**

As an organization, we have invested human and material resources in data collection to learn where we stand. Our next step is to develop a comprehensive strategic plan to right the wrongs inherent to the system and the practices that have diluted our mental health and well-being. I'm not going to lie to you; there are some things we cannot change. The job of education is more stressful, demanding, and challenging than ever. What's at stake is also greater and more meaningful than ever. A healthy organization is supportive, empowering, and compassionate.

It's in this spirit that I wrote this article, as your mental health and well-being are my responsibility, just like mine is yours. Together, our burden is lessened, and our likelihood of success is exponentially larger. This is a statement of intent. This is the next step toward positive mental health and a life-work balance.

*- Souhail Soujah*





# The Impact of NWT's Redesigned Curriculum

## Part 1: Transforming Literacy

### A New Approach to Literacy Education

You might be asking yourself how the change in curriculum is going to benefit students in the Northwest Territories. Isn't all curriculum basically the same? While it's true that all curriculum has outcomes that students are expected to know and do, how the curriculum is delivered is where we have the opportunity to make the biggest impact for our students.







### **Restructuring Education for a Changing World**

Now going into the second year of a five-year implementation plan, the Northwest Territories has begun the process of restructuring education through the introduction of a new curriculum model based on that of British Columbia. Our world is constantly changing, and students need the knowledge and skills that allow them to be analytical thinkers, creative problem solvers, and efficient communicators. Since the beginning, BC's curriculum has emphasized these skills, and adopting such a model in the NWT gives our students the chance to develop them, affording them the ability to prosper in today's world.

### **Focus on Competency-Based and Inquiry-Based Learning**

Under the new curriculum, the focus is on competency-based and inquiry-based learning where students are given the opportunity to make choices in their learning. They are in the driver's seat, making the learning more engaging for them. This approach stimulates deeper thinking and introduces students to different ways of viewing the world. More importantly, it attempts to break away from the traditional classroom model where all students study the same subject matter at the same speed in a cohort of their peers.

### **Integrating Indigenous Perspectives in Literacy**

In English Language Arts, the emphasis is on the simple joy of reading, with Indigenous content and worldviews as a priority. This shift aims to provide our students with a more inclusive and representative education, celebrating the rich cultural heritage of the NWT. Students are guided to think critically, creatively, and reflectively; to gain a sense of personal and cultural identity; and to be respectful and appreciative of diverse perspectives and worldviews.

### **Inclusive and Representative Education**

One of the most significant features of the new curriculum is the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives and authors in literacy programming across all grades and subjects. Indigenous stories, histories, and worldviews are woven into lessons, allowing students to explore and appreciate the diverse cultures within their communities and beyond. Activities might include reading and responding to texts by Indigenous authors, participating in storytelling with Elders, and completing projects that explore traditional knowledge and practices. This approach enriches students' learning and lives while fostering respect and appreciation for others.





### **Presenting Authentic Indigenous Content**

The idea is to present authentic NWT Indigenous peoples' content and worldviews through careful consideration of resources. It is essential to use NWT Indigenous peoples' teaching resources whenever possible that include the many NWT Indigenous voices, both historical and current, and that are created by NWT Indigenous people. It is also crucial to cover themes and issues of NWT Indigenous people including tradition, healing, the importance of Elders, identity loss and affirmation, connection to the land, oral traditions, colonization, and decolonization. Some of these topics might be uncomfortable to teach, but they are part of the history of the people we serve, and our students deserve to learn and understand these important issues and their impact on NWT Indigenous people.

### **Supporting Deeper Learning**

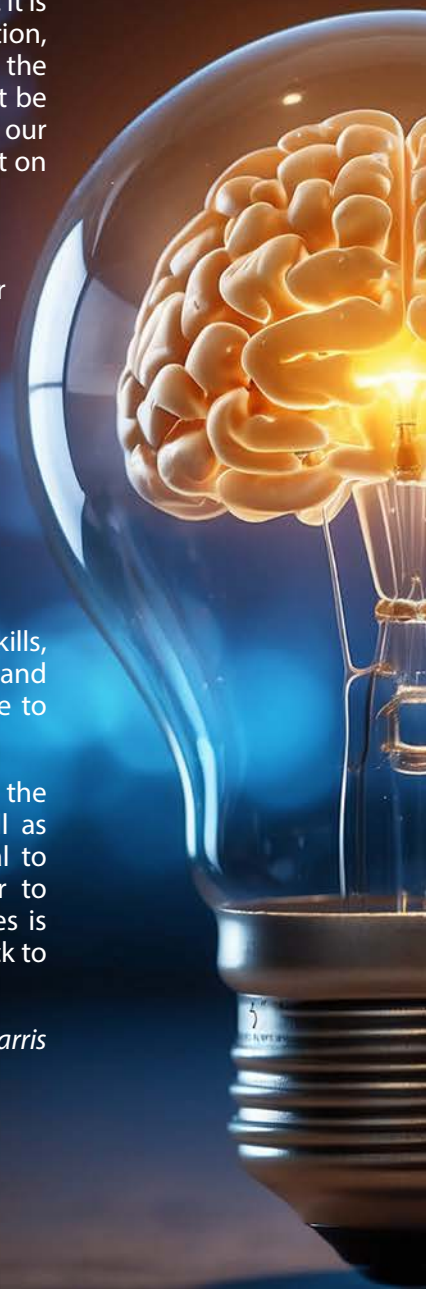
The components of the redesigned curriculum work together to support deeper learning. There is no single "right" way to combine the pieces. Instead, students are provided with choices in what direction their learning will take them. Within the English Language Arts curriculum, the six elements of reading, listening, viewing, writing, speaking, and representing are closely connected, and building skills in one area naturally helps build skills in the other areas. By allowing students a voice and choice in the topics they choose to learn more about, they develop a sense of autonomy, allowing them to take responsibility for their own learning, which often leads to higher levels of motivation, learning, and achievement.

### **Promising Benefits and Future Prospects**

The new curriculum's benefits are promising. As our students master essential skills, they will be better prepared for their futures. Ongoing monitoring, assessment, and improvement of literacy programs will ensure the curriculum remains responsive to students' and society's needs.

The redesigned curriculum is a tremendous step forward for education in the NWT. With its focus on competency-based and inquiry-based learning, as well as the integration of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, it has the potential to significantly improve literacy development. As we continue to work together to support this transition, the opportunity for effective change in literacy outcomes is immense, helping prepare our students to become capable individuals, giving back to their communities and flourishing in an ever-changing world.

*- Vivian Harris*





# The Impact of NWT's Redesigned Curriculum

## Part 2: Transforming STEM

### A New Approach to STEM Education

In the Northwest Territories, the introduction of a redesigned curriculum marks a significant shift in how we approach education in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). This new curriculum, modeled after British Columbia's Applied Design, Skills, and Technologies (ADST) framework, is poised to revolutionize STEM education by focusing on practical skills, design thinking, and real-world applications. The ADST curriculum is embedded in the K-12 education system in British Columbia, and the NWT has adopted this approach to modernize and enhance our STEM education. ADST promotes design thinking and practical skills across various disciplines, preparing students to be innovative problem-solvers and critical thinkers.

### Emphasizing Hands-On Learning

Emphasizing hands-on learning, encouraging students to engage in projects that require practical application of their STEM knowledge. This approach helps students understand the relevance of their studies in real-world contexts, making learning more engaging and meaningful. Design thinking is a cornerstone of the ADST framework, involving a process of empathizing, defining problems, ideating, prototyping, and testing solutions. This method fosters creativity and innovation, equipping students with the skills needed to tackle complex challenges in their future careers.

### Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge

Additionally, the redesigned curriculum incorporates Indigenous knowledge and perspectives, particularly in environmental stewardship, traditional technologies, and sustainable practices. This inclusion enriches the learning experience, promoting a deeper understanding of the land and its resources. Project-based learning (PBL) is central to the new STEM curriculum, where students work on extended projects that integrate multiple STEM disciplines. PBL enhances collaboration, communication, and critical thinking skills, allowing students to see the interconnectedness of science, technology, engineering, and math.

### Focus on Emerging Technologies

The curriculum also includes components on emerging technologies such as robotics, coding, and digital literacy. By familiarizing students with these technologies, we prepare them for the demands of the modern workforce and encourage lifelong learning. Engaging in design thinking and PBL helps students develop advanced problem-solving skills. They learn to approach problems methodically and creatively, an essential skill set for any career in STEM.





### **Benefits of Practical and Real-World Applications**

Hands-on projects and real-world applications make learning more engaging, increasing students' motivation to participate actively in their education. This leads to better academic outcomes and a stronger interest in STEM fields. Incorporating Indigenous perspectives ensures that the curriculum is culturally relevant and inclusive. Students gain a greater appreciation for the diverse knowledge systems that exist within their community, fostering respect and understanding.

### **Preparing Students for Future Careers**

The new curriculum equips students with the skills and knowledge needed for future careers in STEM. By focusing on emerging technologies and practical applications, we ensure that students are well-prepared for the evolving job market. The redesigned STEM curriculum in the Northwest Territories represents a significant step forward in education.

By focusing on practical skills, design thinking, and the integration of Indigenous perspectives, we are preparing our students for a future where they can thrive as innovative thinkers and problem-solvers. As we continue to implement and refine this curriculum, the potential for positive change in STEM education is immense, ensuring our students are ready to meet the challenges of an ever-changing world.

*- Dan Kearley*





“ By focusing on practical skills, design thinking, and the integration of Indigenous perspectives, we are preparing our students for a future where they can thrive as innovative thinkers and problem-solvers. ”





# Nurturing Identity

## Benefits of Teaching Indigenous Languages in Schools

### Fostering Pride and Cultural Heritage

Teaching Indigenous languages in schools holds profound significance for fostering pride, a sense of belonging, and connections to cultural heritage. Indigenous languages are not merely a means of communication; they embody the history, traditions, and identities of their communities. When these languages are integrated into educational systems, they play a pivotal role in preserving and revitalizing cultural heritage.

### Building Self-Esteem & Community Resilience

Learning an Indigenous language instills a sense of pride in students. It affirms the value and importance of their ancestral language, countering historical narratives that have often marginalized or suppressed these languages. When students see their language represented in their education, it validates their identity and heritage, fostering self-esteem and confidence. This pride extends beyond the individual to the broader community, strengthening communal bonds and cultural resilience.

### Promoting a Sense of Belonging

Teaching Indigenous languages promotes a profound sense of belonging. Language is a key component of cultural identity, and when students learn their traditional languages, they feel a deeper

connection to their community and ancestors. This sense of belonging is crucial for mental and emotional well-being, as it provides a supportive framework within which students can thrive. The classroom becomes a space where their cultural identity is acknowledged and celebrated, contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic school environment.

### Accessing Traditional Knowledge & Worldviews

Additionally, Indigenous languages are a rich collection of traditional knowledge and worldviews. By incorporating these languages into school curricula, students gain access to unique perspectives on the world, encompassing environmental stewardship, spirituality, and social values. This connection to cultural roots fosters a holistic understanding of their heritage and its relevance to contemporary issues.

### Affirming Identity & Intergenerational Teachings

Indigenous language learning affirms identity and helps access intergenerational teachings about the land, medicines, self, animal behavior, and more. Teaching them in schools remedies the historical impacts of colonization, specifically residential schools, which greatly stripped students of their cultural and linguistic identities.

### Supporting Cognitive Growth

Indigenous languages support cognitive growth as well. Students learn new word order patterns, ways to communicate, and problem-solving skills while expanding and enhancing worldviews. This cognitive growth is vital for their overall academic and personal development.

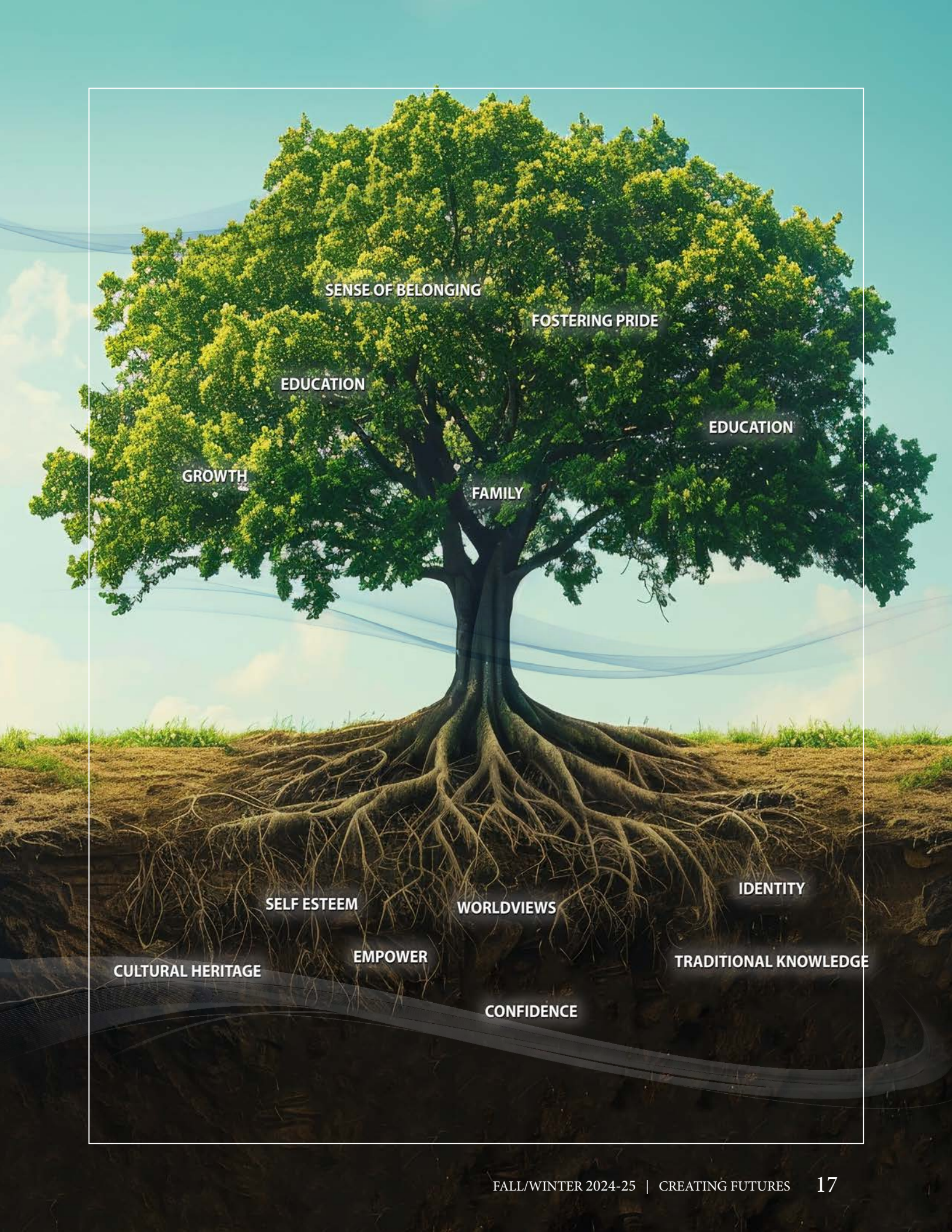
### Opening Career Pathways

Furthermore, learning an Indigenous language opens up pathways to alternative careers in health, education, government, tourism, and other businesses. Speakers can become translators, interpreters, or teachers, thus broadening their career opportunities and economic prospects.

Teaching Indigenous languages in schools is essential for nurturing pride, fostering a sense of belonging, and maintaining cultural connections. It empowers Indigenous students, enriches the educational experience, and ensures the continuity of invaluable cultural traditions. Embracing these languages within the educational framework is a step towards a more inclusive and culturally aware society.

- Justin Heron





SENSE OF BELONGING

FOSTERING PRIDE

EDUCATION

EDUCATION

GROWTH

FAMILY

SELF ESTEEM

WORLDVIEWS

IDENTITY

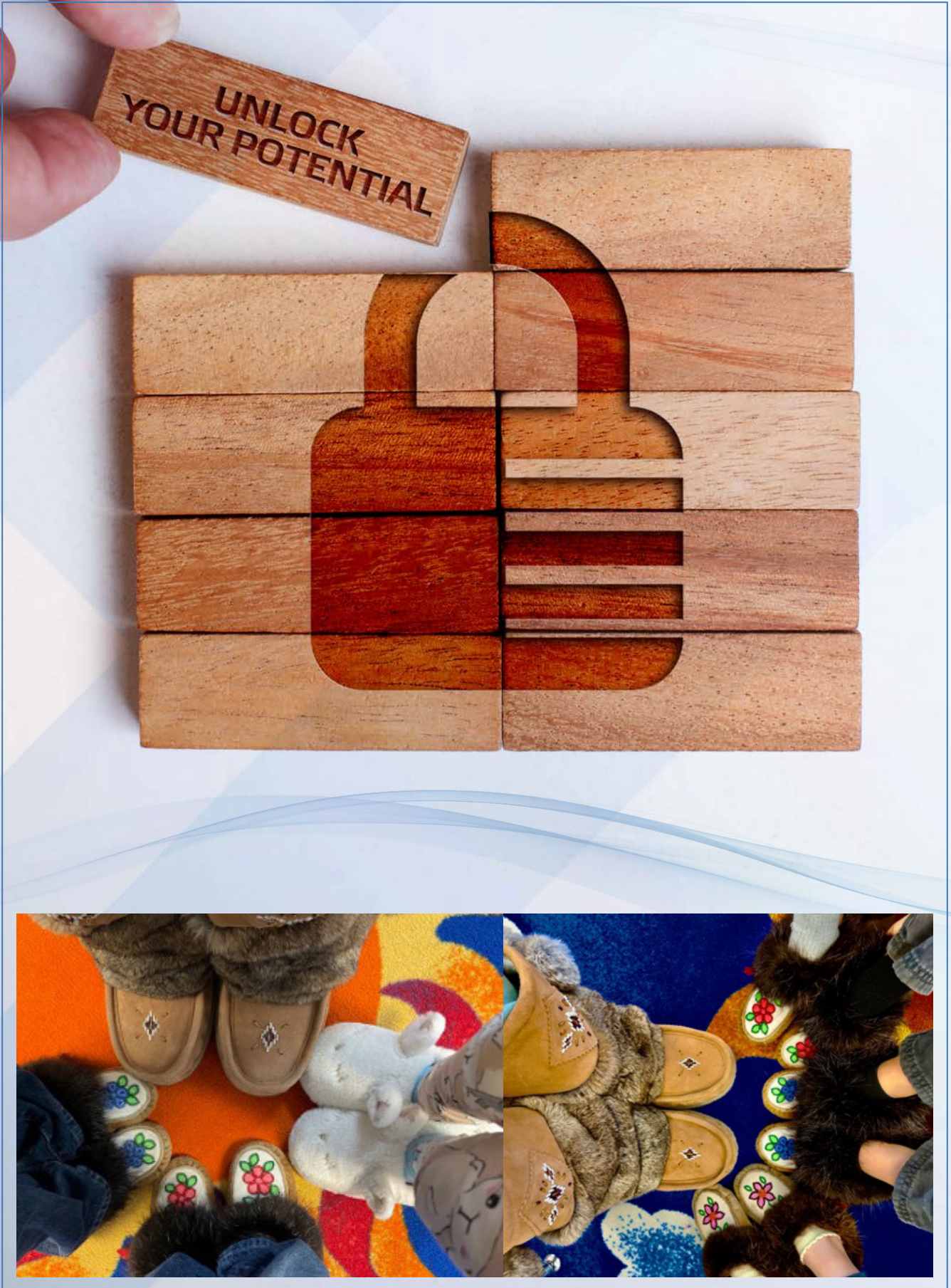
CULTURAL HERITAGE

EMPOWER

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

CONFIDENCE







# Unlocking Potential

## The Multidimensional Benefits of Bilingual Education

### A Multilingual Community in Fort Smith

In the heart of Fort Smith, a multilingual community flourishes, where the importance of bilingualism is deeply ingrained in the educational fabric. At JBT, where I have the privilege of working, and at PWK, where my colleagues dedicate their efforts, students are offered a unique opportunity to learn two languages, thereby nurturing and sustaining their multilingual brains. The choices range from English and French to English and Cree, and English and Chipewyan, reflecting the rich linguistic diversity of the region. Beyond the classroom, being bilingual offers a myriad of benefits that extend into various aspects of life, opening doors to new opportunities and fostering cognitive, social, and economic advantages.

### Cognitive Benefits of Bilingualism

One of the most profound advantages of being bilingual is its impact on cognitive development. Research consistently shows that bilingual individuals exhibit enhanced mental flexibility, problem-solving skills, and creativity. The process of switching between languages requires a high level of mental control and attention, which can strengthen the brain's executive functions. These functions are crucial for tasks that involve planning, focusing attention, and juggling multiple tasks simultaneously. This cognitive boost can translate into better academic performance and a greater ability to adapt to complex learning environments.

### Academic Advantages and Literacy Skills

Bilingual students often develop a deeper understanding of linguistic structures and a greater appreciation for literature and culture in both languages. This dual-language proficiency can lead to higher literacy levels and improved comprehension skills. Furthermore, studies have shown that bilingual students tend to outperform their monolingual peers in standardized tests, particularly in subjects that require critical thinking and verbal skills. The ability to speak, read, and write fluently in multiple languages is an invaluable asset in an increasingly interconnected world.

### Social and Cultural Enrichment

Being bilingual opens a world of social and cultural enrichment. For students, learning Cree or Chipewyan

alongside English not only preserves and honours their cultural heritage but also fosters a deeper connection to their community. It enables them to communicate more effectively with family members, elders, and community leaders, strengthening social bonds and enhancing cultural identity. Similarly, those who choose to learn French can engage with a broader Francophone community, both locally and globally, expanding their cultural horizons and fostering greater inclusivity.

### Economic Advantages of Bilingualism

The economic advantages of being bilingual cannot be overstated. In today's globalized economy, employers highly value bilingualism as it enhances communication with international clients and partners. It can also open doors to diverse career opportunities. Whether in fields like translation, education, healthcare, or business, bilingual individuals often have a competitive edge in the job market. Moreover, bilingualism can lead to higher earning potential and greater job security, as companies increasingly seek employees who can navigate multiple linguistic and cultural landscapes.

### Personal Growth and Global Citizenship

Beyond tangible benefits, being bilingual fosters personal growth and a sense of global citizenship. It encourages empathy, as students learn to see the world from different linguistic and cultural perspectives. This broadened worldview can lead to greater tolerance and understanding, essential qualities in today's diverse, plurilingual, and pluricultural societies. This means growing up with a strong sense of identity and a readiness to engage with the world around them.

### A Successful and Fulfilling Future

The bilingual programs at JBT and PWK schools offer students more than just language skills; they provide cognitive, academic, social, economic, and personal benefits that prepare them for a successful and fulfilling future. By keeping their multilingual brains active, students are not only preserving their cultural heritage but also unlocking new doors to a world of opportunities.

*- Joseph Marcel Virassamy*





## Spotlight: Pennie Pokiak

### Leading with Vision & Commitment as DEC Chair

#### Meet Pennie Pokiak

The South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) has welcomed a new Chairperson, Pennie Pokiak. Pennie brings a wealth of experience to her new role, as the longest-serving member of the Divisional Education Council (DEC) board. Pennie has a clear vision and is committed to making a positive impact on education in the South Slave region.

#### Stepping into the Role

Pennie's decision to take on the role of DEC Chair was driven by her extensive experience and logical progression on the board. ***"I was the longest-serving member at the time on the board, so logically it made the most sense for me to step up into the role as Chair,"*** she explained. Her immediate priority is to understand the intricacies of how the Board Office and the Department of Education, Culture, and Employment (ECE) interact, and how their work impacts the local districts in the South Slave region. This understanding is crucial for Pennie to ensure the board can hold itself accountable and be effective in its duties.

#### Vision and Goals

Pennie's long-term goals for the DEC are centered around advocating for proper funding and ensuring that delivering a quality education remains the top priority. ***"No matter where you live, providing a proper education to students in the NWT should be everyone's number one goal,"*** she emphasized. Building on the work of her predecessor, Pennie plans to continue fostering collaboration between the board, local DEAs (District Education Authorities – she is a member of the Hay River DEA), and ECE.

#### Challenges and Opportunities

Addressing the major challenges facing the DEC, Pennie pointed out the perennial issue of funding. ***"Over the years, costs keep rising and funding keeps dropping. People are leaving the North, and that is having a direct impact on***

***our schools in the South Slave,"*** she noted. The outdated funding formula needs to be revised to meet current demands. Pennie believes that government departments need to work together and maintain accountability at all levels to overcome these financial challenges.

Despite these challenges, the SSDEC chair sees significant opportunities for growth and improvement within the DEC. ***"We have a great team, we work well together, and share the same common goals. We are committed to invoking positive change,"*** she said. Her leadership aims to leverage this teamwork and commitment to drive forward impactful and meaningful initiatives.

#### Community and Impact

Engagement with students, staff, and the community is a priority for Pennie. She maintains an open-door policy, welcoming discussions and looking forward to collaborative efforts with all parties involved. ***"I think things run pretty smoothly, but I'm a firm believer in the saying 'just because it's always been done that way, doesn't mean it's the right way.' I look forward to working with Souhail and the rest of the Board office,"*** she expressed.

With her experience, dedication, and fresh perspective, Pennie Pokiak is set to lead the DEC with a focus on accountability, collaboration, and positive change. Her tenure promises to bring a renewed energy and commitment to ensuring quality education for all students in the NWT.



## Spotlight: Tiffany Kelly

### Preserving Tradition Through Storytelling



#### Meet Tiffany Kelly

Tiffany Kelly, an Indigenous author and Principal at Joseph Burr Tyrrell Elementary School, has made a significant impact on children's literature with her ability to weave traditional stories into engaging and meaningful narratives. With three published books, Tiffany is sharing her Dene and Inuk heritage with children, ensuring that these important lessons are passed on to future generations.

#### Inspired by Tradition

Tiffany's first book, **The Dancing Trees**, is based on an oral legend passed down from her grandmother. The story follows a boastful boy who learns an unforgettable lesson from the trees after disrespecting the forest. This tale emphasizes the importance of respecting the earth, a value deeply rooted in Dene and Inuk traditions. It's not just a story for children but a reminder for all readers to maintain harmony with nature.

Her second book, **We Love You as Much as the Fox Loves its Tail**, is a heartwarming exploration of familial love. The book introduces readers to animals of the North, celebrating the deep connections within families and offering a unique perspective on love and affection through the lens of Northern wildlife. It's a perfect story for young readers, filled with warmth and cultural significance.

Tiffany's newest release, **Bannock in a Hammock**, brings a fun and lighthearted approach to storytelling. This rhyming book explores the many ways to enjoy bannock—whether big or small, sweet or savory, with stew or sprinkles. Complete with a bannock recipe, the story celebrates this favorite Inuit food while creating a joyful connection to Indigenous culinary traditions.

#### A Voice for Indigenous Stories

As an Indigenous author, Tiffany is committed to sharing stories that reflect her heritage. *"I feel it's important that our stories are told and shared,"* she says. Each of her books is a reflection of her experiences, values, and traditions. Her work contributes to the growing representation of Indigenous stories in children's literature, providing a window into the diverse cultures of the North.

Tiffany's stories also serve as a way to help non-Indigenous readers appreciate the depth of Indigenous teachings. By sharing these narratives, she's playing a vital role in preserving the traditions of her people while making them accessible to a wider audience.

#### Advice for Young Indigenous Storytellers

For young Indigenous students who aspire to become storytellers, Kelly has simple yet powerful advice: *"Listen to the stories that our Elders and Knowledge Keepers share with us. We are losing our Elders, and once they are gone, many of our stories are also gone with them. Write down your ideas, even in the middle of the night. And don't be afraid to submit your stories for publication—you never know where they might take you."*

#### Looking Ahead

With three books now published, Tiffany shows no signs of slowing down. Her stories continue to resonate with children and families, fostering a greater understanding of Indigenous cultures and the Northern landscape. As she continues to write, Tiffany remains driven by a desire to ensure that future generations are connected to their heritage through storytelling.





Marlin King-Miersch during graduation and also receiving the youth award from Deninu Kue at the Akaitcho Territory Assembly.

### Background and Family

Marlin Miersch-King, a dedicated and inspiring youth from Fort Resolution, comes from a family of four. Raised in a traditional household, Marlin's parents have always been strong supporters of his education and have instilled in him the importance of maintaining cultural traditions. Marlin's hobbies and interests include hunting and trapping, activities he participates in regularly and in his spare time, skidooing and dirt biking.

### Language Revitalization Efforts

Marlin has been actively involved in language revitalization efforts, particularly through his work with Kaysea Fountain, Jerrica Sanderson, and the Northwest Territory Métis Nation (NWTMN). These efforts included supporting language immersion camps in Fort Resolution and Fort Smith. As part of a trial program, Marlin helped teach the traditional language of Chipewyan, one of the main spoken languages of the Dene people.

Marlin expressed his opportunity in being chosen to help bring back the language, stating, *"For me, it felt like it showed people that there's hope for our language to survive when others saw the younger generation speaking it and teaching it to others."*

### Achievements and Recognition

Marlin's dedication to cultural preservation has not gone unnoticed. In 2021, he was honoured with the Aboriginal Sports Circle Language and Culture Award, recognizing his efforts to learn from his elders, family, and community. Reflecting on this recognition, Marlin shared, *"I was honoured that I was selected out of all the nominees in the Northwest Territories. It showed me that I was appreciated for my efforts in carrying on my culture so that I don't lose it and one day be able to pass my teachings down."*

Additionally, Marlin was chosen to represent Deninu Kue at the Dene Assembly in Yellowknife as a youth representative and received the Deninu Kue First Nation youth award. He expressed his gratitude for these honours, saying, *"I am very honoured and it makes me feel really good inside knowing people respect me enough to award me for my hard work."*

### Participation in the Arctic Winter Games

Marlin also showcased his athletic skills at the 2024 Dene Games at the Arctic Winter Games (AWG) in Matanuska-Susitna Valley, Alaska. His participation in all five events—finger pull, stick pull, snow snake, pole push, and hand games—demonstrated his versatility and physical skill. Marlin placed 3rd in



# Spotlight: Marlin Miersch-King

## A Remarkable Youth from Fort Resolution



Marlin in Yellowknife, NT meeting Prince Charles and Camilla, next Marlin receiving the Aboriginal Culture and Language award, and finally Chipewyan Words of the Week with the NWT Métis Nation.

finger pull, top 10 in snow snake and stick pull, 2nd in hand games, and secured a gold medal in pole push. He highlighted the significance of winning gold in pole push by defeating Greenland, a team that had not been beaten in years. ***"It was a bittersweet victory for us all because we were all friends,"*** he said.

***"It was scary, and I contemplated not going a few times, but I was able to overcome my fears by knowing I would be taken care of by great coaches,"*** he explained. This experience taught him that he could achieve anything he set his mind to and provided him with valuable skills.

### Reflection of the Dene Games

Marlin emphasized the importance of the Dene Games in preserving and promoting Indigenous culture. ***"These events all have a meaning or reason as to why they are done. They weren't just all fun and games; these were sports centered around our culture and daily survival practices,"*** he said. Representing the Northwest Territories in such a significant cultural and athletic event was a source of pride for Marlin.

### Community Involvement and Future Goals

Marlin has also served as a peer facilitator in the SMASH (Strength, Masculinities, and Sexual Health)

Program in the NWT, helping other young men practice the program's teachings. His commitment to his community is evident through his numerous roles and projects, including his \$1,500 community project to help his school as part of the SMASH retreat.

Looking ahead, Marlin aspires to enter the field of mechanics and eventually own a trucking company with his father. Inspired by watching his dad work on various equipment, Marlin has always wanted to follow in his footsteps. Balancing his various commitments to school, community, and personal interests, Marlin acknowledges the challenges but remains determined to make everything work. ***"When you really want something to work, you will find ways to make sure it works".***

### Continued Commitment to Culture & Education

Marlin's journey is a testament to his dedication to cultural preservation, education, and community support. His involvement in language revitalization, his recognition and awards, and his future aspirations highlight his remarkable contributions and potential. With a strong foundation of family support and a deep connection to his cultural heritage, Marlin Miersch-King continues to inspire and make a positive impact in his community and beyond.



## A Logo for Our Future

### Inspired by Our Students

The new SSDEC logo is a reflection of the creativity, vision, and culture of the communities we serve. What makes this logo truly unique is that every element was drawn from submissions by the children in our schools. By engaging our students in this process, we have created a symbol that not only represents our mission, values, and goals but also embodies the voices and dreams of the next generation.

This updated design honours our connection to the land and Indigenous heritage while embracing modern elements that reflect the SSDEC's commitment to progress and educational excellence. Each component—whether it's the guiding strength of the inukshuk, the unity of the medicine wheel, or the vibrant spirit of the northern lights—tells a story about who we are and where we are going. Our mission to prepare students to create their futures is visually captured in this logo, a testament to our collective journey toward growth, cultural pride, and educational achievement.

With pride, we showcase this new logo, created by our children, to inspire the students, staff, and communities of the South Slave region for generations to come.





## Logo Elements



### NAVIGATE / MEDICINE WHEEL

*nanānisk / t'at'ú haʔa / ahsii ghádeh ats'et'ih / naviguer*

The navigational guidance of a compass with the spiritual insights of the Indigenous Medicine Wheel, serving as a beacon on the educational journey.



### INUKSHUK

The Inukshuk symbolizes guidance and the unity of the three distinct Indigenous peoples of the NWT.



### 8 CHILDREN

*ayinānēw awāsisak / ʔelk'di skui / t sudaā ets'edni / huit enfants*

Eight figures dancing in harmony, their rhythmic unity reflect the collaborative educational spirit of our eight schools.

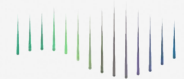


### INFINITY

*kākikē / k'ettā ts'ēn / t'atseḡ ḡolih ḡots'ēh / infini*

The infinity symbol seamlessly emerges from the river, representing the Métis heritage - enduring unity and the intertwining of cultural narratives, reflecting resilience and a steadfast sense of identity.

### AURORA BOREALIS



*cipayinihiitowak / yaka nágēs / borealis naakah / aurores boréales*

The aurora borealis weaves a celestial tapestry, symbolizing the vibrant nature of learning and illuminating the journey.

### 5 TREES



*niyānan mistikwak / sḡlághe dechēne / Ts'u sḡlái / cinq arbres*

The five trees are a testament to the five distinct communities of the South Slave. Representing our commitment to fostering growth and deep-rooted knowledge. Diverse in form but united in spirit, the strength of our educational collective.

### DRUM

*mātowehikan / ʔelghēl / eyeli / ambour*

Within, a circle symbolizes the drum, echoing unity. A harmonizing of our collective educational journey.

### THE LAND

*askiy / nēn / ndéh / la terre*

The blue river running between the green hills symbolize our journey and echoing the South Slave's natural beauty. The continuous flow of knowledge and the supportive strength of our communities.

### 3 FEATHERS



*nisto mekwana / taghe ʔechuze / choh tai / trois plumes*

A symbol of honour and strength, bridging ancient teachings with the present. The medicine wheel linked with three feathers signify the spiritual and physical journeys guided by the wheel's wisdom and pays homage to the First Nation's People.

In 1991, the SSDEC held a logo contest, and the winning design served the organization for many years. As time progressed, the need for a more modern, memorable, and visually balanced logo became clear. The new logo, inspired by elements from our students' submissions, reflects our deep community connection and commitment to indigenizing. It incorporates Indigenous symbols and represents the five communities and eight schools within our jurisdiction. This updated design encapsulates the essence of SSDEC's mission and values, blending tradition with progress to inspire and educate future generations.







# Celebrating Achievements

## SSDEC Students Shine at the 2024 Arctic Winter Games

### Showcasing Talent and Culture at the Arctic Winter Games

The 2024 Arctic Winter Games (AWG) in Matanuska-Susitna Valley, Alaska, provided an exceptional platform for students from the South Slave Divisional Education Council (SSDEC) to showcase their skills, particularly in the Dene Games. This year's participants not only demonstrated their athletic prowess but also highlighted the cultural significance of these traditional sports. Among the many talented athletes, Marlin Meirsch-King and Canan Olvera were two of many that stood out for their remarkable performances and personal journeys.

### A Glimpse into the Dene Games

The Dene Games are a series of traditional Indigenous sports that include hand games, stick pull, pole push, finger pull, and snow snake. These games are rooted in the survival skills of Indigenous peoples, reflecting their history and daily practices. The South Slave students competed with great enthusiasm and dedication, bringing home numerous medals and invaluable experiences.





### Coaches' Perspectives: Nurturing Talent and Culture

The success of the SSDEC students at the AWG would not have been possible without the dedication and support of coaches like Justin Heron. Victoria Heron, highlighted the unique nature of the Dene Games. ***"Dene Games are different from any other sport at AWGs because it's like we're all a big family. Even though we are competing, we're still cheering on everyone,"*** she said. Victoria emphasized the cultural significance of the games, explaining how each sport has traditional meanings, for example, the event snow snake representing hunting techniques on snow and ice.

Victoria's commitment to promoting Dene Games in the community has been unwavering. ***"I have coached kids from JBT and PWK for Dene Games, and this year I was fortunate to put together and host JBT's first hand games tournament,"*** she shared. Her goal is to instill a love for the sport and its cultural heritage in the younger generation, ensuring that the tradition continues to thrive.



## Marlin Meirsch-King: A Passion for Tradition

Marlin Meirsch-King's deep connection to his culture and tradition was evident throughout the games. *"I have always been involved in my traditional culture and games, so participating in the Dene Games was a natural fit for me,"* he shared. Marlin competed in all five events, securing a gold medal in pole push, a silver medal in hand games, and a bronze in finger pull. His dedication and hard work were clear as he overcame the challenge of competing in a new country away from his family.

*"The most memorable moment was winning gold in pole push and defeating Greenland, a team that had not been beaten in years,"* Marlin recounted. This victory was particularly special as it fostered a sense of camaraderie and sportsmanship among the competitors, despite the fierce competition. For Marlin, the Dene Games are more than just a sport. They are a means to preserve and promote Indigenous culture. *"These events all have a meaning or reason as to why they are done. It wasn't just all fun and games; these were sports centered around our culture and daily survival practices,"* he explained. Looking to the future, Marlin aspires to continue competing and sharing his passion for the Dene Games, inspiring younger generations to embrace their heritage.







### Canan Olvera: Embracing the Challenge

Canan Olvera's journey to the AWG was driven by encouragement from his coach and a desire to seize new opportunities. *"My coach encouraged me, and with all the different events, I knew there would be opportunities for me to be competitive,"* Canan said. His preparation focused primarily on grip strength, which paid off as he secured a silver medal in stick pull, a silver medal for overall points in his division, and a gold medal in the team event pole push and a silver medal in hand games.

*"Beating Nunavut and Greenland in pole push was my best memory,"* Canan recalled. *"Not just because we won the gold medal, but because those teams were competitive, and we were determined to win that day."* Despite the initial challenge of learning the sport's rules and techniques, Canan's determination and teamwork led to a successful and memorable experience. Participating in the Dene Games also had a profound impact on Canan's cultural awareness. *"It keeps the culture alive and introduces it to people like me, who are non-Indigenous,"* he noted. Representing the Northwest Territories in such a significant cultural and athletic event was a source of pride for Canan, who was born and raised in the region.



### Looking Ahead: Building on Success

The achievements of South Slave students at the 2024 AWG have not only brought pride to our schools and communities but have also highlighted the importance of preserving and promoting Indigenous culture through sports. The experiences and lessons learned from participating in the Dene Games will undoubtedly shape the future aspirations of these young athletes.

As Marlin and Canan continue their journeys, they serve as role models for their peers, demonstrating the value of perseverance, cultural pride, and teamwork. The SSDEC remains committed to supporting its students in their athletic and cultural pursuits, ensuring that the legacy of the Dene Games endures for generations to come.





## Digital Wellness

### Tips for a Safe Online Experience

As our world becomes increasingly digital, hyper-connected, and complex, the lines between our physical and online lives blur more every day. For SSDEC educators, students, and parents, this shift brings both incredible opportunities and new challenges. While the internet offers a wealth of resources and tools to enhance learning and communication, it also opens the door to cybersecurity threats that can disrupt our work and personal lives. That's why it's crucial for everyone to take proactive steps to ensure their online safety. SSDEC and GNWT have safety measures to help protect teachers, students, and families in our daily online environments, but staying safe online is everyone's responsibility.

Here are some tips to help you navigate the changing digital landscape more securely:

#### Update Your Software Regularly

Keeping your software up to date is one of the simplest yet most effective ways to protect yourself online. Software updates often include patches for security vulnerabilities that cybercriminals can exploit. Make sure to enable automatic updates on your devices, and if your device reminds you to update the operating system, that is a good thing to do.

#### Use Strong, Unique Passwords

Passwords are your first line of defence. Ensure that your passwords are strong - this means using a mix of letters, numbers, and symbols. Avoid using easily guessable information like birthdays or common words. Each of your accounts should have a unique password to minimize the risk of getting compromised. Maybe consider using a free online password manager like BitWarden to keep track.

#### Be Mindful of Public Wi-Fi

Public Wi-Fi networks, such as those in coffee shops, hotels, and airports, can be convenient but are often not secure. Avoid accessing sensitive information or logging into important accounts when connected to public Wi-Fi. Using your cell data or a hotspot to your phone is more secure than using public, unprotected Wi-Fi networks.

#### Be Cautious with Emails and Text Messages

One of the most common threats is phishing emails, where scammers pose as someone you trust to steal your information or trick you into performing actions like buying gift cards. Always treat any financial request coming through email as suspicious. Be cautious of urgent requests or offers that seem too good to be true. Be especially vigilant with requests to make purchases, buy gift cards, transfer money, or perform online banking transactions.



// Building a safer digital world starts with simple, daily habits in cybersecurity. Together, we can protect our students, families, and ourselves. //



### **Back Up Your Data Regularly**

The best way to keep your data safe and backed up is to use a Cloud Drive. This way, even if your work device is compromised or damaged, you are less likely to lose valuable information.

### **Trust Your Instincts**

Finally, trust your instincts. If something feels wrong or suspicious, it probably is. Don't ignore those gut feelings—take a moment to think and verify. Whether it's an email that seems off or a strange request from a colleague or friend, it's better to be cautious and double-check than to fall victim to a scam.

### **Secure Your Devices**

Ensure that your devices are secured with passwords. Make sure to log out of your device or lock it before you walk away from it to prevent other people from accessing it.

### **We Can Build A Safer Digital Environment**

Incorporating these cybersecurity tips into your daily routine is a powerful step toward creating a safer digital environment for yourself, our students, and our families. We can protect ourselves and our educational community from online threats by staying informed, cautious, and proactive.

- Todd Sturgeon



### **Mission**

The SSDEC strives to prepare students to create their futures by ensuring high levels of learning for ALL.

### **Vision**

All individuals reach their educational potential.

### **Values**

Respect, Integrity, Loyalty,  
Commitment to Growth, Advocacy.



PO BOX 510, 202 MCDOUGAL ROAD, FORT SMITH, NT X0E 0P0 P (867) 872-5701 F (867) 872-2150 E [INFO@SSDEC.ORG](mailto:INFO@SSDEC.ORG)

**SOUTH SLAVE DIVISIONAL EDUCATION COUNCIL**

*We respectfully acknowledge that we are working and learning on the traditional territory of the Dene and Métis people who for countless generations are the caretakers of the land.*