Transitions in School Counselling

Provincial Aboriginal Education Conference

for more information about this conference and other First Nations education initiatives please contact:

First Nations Education Steering Committee
#113 - 100 Park Royal South
West Vancouver, BC V7T 1A2

T. 604.925.6087 Toll Free 1.877.422.3672
www.fnesc.ca

November 2, 3 and 4, 2002
Richmond, BC

contents

Provincial Aboriginal Education Conference

"Transitions in School Counselling"

November 2, 3 and 4, 2002

Richmond, BC

day one

day two

opening remarks

Deborah Jeffrey, President, First Nations Education Steering Committee

Deborah Jeffrey, President of the First Nations Education Steering Committee, began the Provincial Aboriginal Education Conference by welcoming all of the conference participants and introducing Musqueam Elder Emily Stogan, who wished everyone a successful, informative event, and also shared an opening prayer.

Deborah thanked Emily Stogan for her guidance, and she also thanked the Coast Salish people for allowing the conference to take place on their traditional territories.

"It is a privilege to have this opportunity to address all of you this morning. I see so many people I know and so many people who are deeply committed to our children that I feel like I am talking to old friends.

I would like to begin this morning by acknowledging the co-hosts of this event – the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and the BC Ministry of Education Aboriginal Enhancements Branch. The growing partnership we are enjoying with the staff of the Aboriginal Enhancements Branch is very exciting, and I believe that our cooperation will result in improved programs and services for all First Nations learners.

This morning, I would like to talk about the choice of conference theme, and about the theme of transitions generally. Before I start with those topics, however, I would like to tell you a little bit more about myself. I am a mother, an educator, the President of FNESC, I served on the BC Teachers Federation Task Force on Aboriginal Education, and I am currently a member of the Minister of Indian Affair's National Advisory Committee on First Nations Education. My life's work has been dedicated to children, and I am very proud of that fact.

Over the past several years, we have selected a number of different themes for the provincial Aboriginal education conferences, always selecting issues that we think require special attention. Some of our previous conferences have focused on Aboriginal languages, literacy, math, and science. I believe that the 600 people in attendance here today attests to the interest in this year's theme of transitions in counseling. The relevance of that issue for educators is embodied in the results we are seeing for our students; their success rates are improving, but there is still much more work to be done.

Aboriginal students now represent seven percent of the student population, and that proportion is growing rapidly. Yet the percentage of Aboriginal students not progressing to grade nine is approximately fourteen percent, and the birth rate for Aboriginal girls aged 15 – 19 is six times as high as that of the non-Aboriginal population. Sixty percent of Aboriginal students did not graduate last year. That is far too much lost hope, lost opportunity. We are also not satisfied with the literacy and numeracy levels of our students.

But while we have many concerns, we also need to celebrate the growth that is occurring, focus on the good work being done, and look for creative ways to increase our efforts. We will hear about some of the creative approaches that are being implemented over the next two days.

When we talk about transitions, several key themes come up. Parents and community members have talked to us through our regional sessions, and we continually hear from people about their needs. Aboriginal students and parents need to be better informed about course selections so that parents can assist their children in reaching their goals. In our School District, there are some years when no First Nations students take math 12. We have been working to address that need through a range of efforts. We must continue to focus our time and energy to ensure that students make it through the challenging transitions in their lives.

It is no secret that Aboriginal people are absent from the curriculum. We need to address that situation, and understand what it does to our children as they try to find their identities, particularly in their difficult teen years. We need to increase the numbers of Aboriginal teachers because our children need to have positive role models for guidance and inspiration. Many organizations are showcasing wonderful Aboriginal people through role model posters, and we are trying to highlight role models through initiatives such as the Seventh Generation Club. The Aboriginal Teacher Education Consortium is also implementing a broad strategy aimed at addressing this issue. Finally, we are very proud to be presenting a role model panel at this Conference.

Schools also need to make Aboriginal parents and community members feel welcome. We must find ways to have them engaged in the public education system. Sometimes schools think that parents don't care. That is a lie. All parents love their children and want the best for them, but there are many aspects of our histories and a colonial legacy that presents challenges for Aboriginal parents. In spite of those challenges, I want to ensure all of you that our parents care. When we hold a graduation ceremony in our community, there is not a seat to be found. Everyone wants to be involved in ensuring that the success of our children is recognized and celebrated. The First Nations Parents Club is flourishing, showing the interest of our parents in education and learning. Last May, we held a First Nations Parents Conference, and that event was over-subscribed. Parents will tell us what is good for their children if we find ways to let them. Parents are vital as our children's first teachers, and they are vital to their ongoing success.

We need to believe in children. I've been a teacher for 20 years, and I believe that not enough of us believe our children can succeed. We all live up to our expectations. We have to be honest about that and think about how we deal with Aboriginal children. Why are we seeing our children acting out? Why are our children over-represented in special education, with approximately ten percent of Aboriginal children included in the severe behaviour category, versus only three percent of the general student population? What more can we do to better meet our children's needs and ensure that they are valued in our classrooms and schools? Our children are everything to us, and as educators we have a key role in making sure that they do not lose hope.

Our children are struggling to find themselves. We need to talk about racism in schools and address it directly, because it is being played out in the self-destruction of our young people. We have been working with the other Education Partners to develop an anti-racism toolkit to help us all deal with challenging issues in more meaningful, proactive ways. I am optimistic that having more conversations about racism will help to raise awareness about its terrible effects. We held a workshop in Terrace this year, during which all of the students present said that there was no racism in their

schools. Yet every student also said that they were being pushed to take non-academic courses even if they didn't want to. Our kids are so used to this situation that they do not even call it racism. We want that to change, and one way to do that is to continually measure the numbers of students enrolled in non-academic courses. I firmly believe that what gets measured gets addressed. The response to the statistics gathered by the BC Ministry of Education is one example of that reality.

All of us can address the issue of low expectations. Teachers can do that in their day-to-day interactions with children. They can show our children respect, encouragement, and value. Schools can also encourage parental and community involvement in lasting, real ways. And school counselors are key in this regard. They can provide students with advice, guidance, support, and a sympathetic ear on a bad day.

The notion of transitions is incredibly complex. It involves transitions from home to school, from one school to another, from grade to grade, and from First Nations to non-First Nations schools. In addition, despite our sad history of colonialism, we are in a legal transition to a better place, thanks in part to favourable court decisions. Our communities are also in transition as we work to improve our quality of life through a variety of mechanisms. Finally, our public schools are undergoing massive changes.

Over the years we have seen significant progress, including an increased emphasis on Aboriginal education and much more respectful relationships. Our partners are becoming more involved and engaged, with increased cooperation and more positive attitudes. We are implementing a number of excellent strategies, including accountability contracts and enhancement agreements. We are also establishing a new relationship with the provincial counselors association. These may appear to be small steps, but they are actually huge. They send a strong message to others about the importance of Aboriginal education. And I believe they are part of a transition to a better society, built upon reconciliation, respect, and a more comprehensive understanding of First Nations people and their place within Canada.

I would like to end by thanking you for the privilege of sharing my thoughts with you this morning, and wish you all the best for the next two days."

keynote address

Dr. Eber Hampton, President, Saskatchewan Indian Federated College

Dr. Eber Hampton is a member of the Chickasaw Nation of Oklahoma. He was born in 1942 in Talihini, Oklahoma, and received his elementary and secondary schooling in the public school system, which he says was the beginning of his "white" education.

Dr. Hampton is noted as an academic who has an exceptional interdisciplinary vision and who has also kept in touch with the traditional values of his own and other Indian communities.

Dr. Hampton graduated from Westmont College in 1964 with a Bachelor of Arts, cum laude, in psychology. Following his graduation he held positions as a lecturer of classes like the "Psychology of Learning," Psychology of the Exceptional Child," and "Culture and Personality." He was the Co-Director of a residential college program set up by Mankato State University to provide a "total education environment" for students from the White Earth Reservation, and he was the Director of the Minority Group Study Center at the same University. While at Mankato State University he contributed to the work of many community-based Indian organizations.

In 1978, Dr. Hampton received the Bush Foundation Leadership Development Fellowship, which is granted to individuals who demonstrate exceptional leadership skills. With that Fellowship, he attended Harvard University where he received his Ph.D from the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1988. His dissertation topic was "Steps Toward a Native Theory of Education."

Dr. Hampton came to the SIFC in July of 1991 from the University of Alaska where he was an Assistant Professor of Education, Associate Dean of the College of Rural Alaska, and the Chair of the Department of Education. Prior to moving to Alaska in 1986, he was the Director of the American Indian Program at Harvard University from 1982 to 1986. He was responsible for teaching Indian Education, providing student support, fundraising, and administration, and working with members of the faculty and community. It was there that he gained a reputation for bringing people together in a supportive environment and contributing to the success of the people around him.

"Good morning Elders and co-workers. I am very pleased to be in attendance at this event, and I really appreciate Deborah's comments, as they lead directly to what I want to say this morning.

My name is Eber Hampton. I am a Chickasaw Indian. I have been in education since first grade – basically my entire life. I started my first full-time teaching job in 1970.

Last night, I reviewed the binder of information provided by the conference organizers, and I was left with the overwhelming impression of the courage it requires to take on such immense challenges and face the obstacles before us. We must all persist, keep on keeping on, back up our children, parents, communities, and work with our colleagues with compassion, even though it sometimes feels like we are banging our heads against a wall.

Someone once said to me that education is not rocket science. I replied, "no, it's tougher!" We have had people on the moon but we still cannot graduate a majority of our children from high school. Addressing this issue will take everything we've got … all of our knowledge and all of our strength. It will require great courage to take on the task at hand.

I spoke with someone this morning who goes into the classroom every day. He said that he is scared every single first day of school. I think there must be something special inside of people that helps us know the right thing to do even when it is hard.

On the other hand, it often seems to me that some people have never been afraid of anything. Nothing seems to faze them. I am not that way. I feel the awesome challenges before me. I know the fear of failure. I know the feeling that I might not be good enough. For those of you who do not know fear, you can help me this morning by listening, and trying to understand people like me.

I am the President of the Saskatchewan Federated Indian College. I have been in that job for 11 years. In fact, I always wanted to be a faculty member, and I applied for a faculty position over and over. Finally, I received a phone call asking me to apply for the job of President, and I was eventually offered that job. They always say that you should be careful what you pray for.

In getting ready to move my family and take up my new position, I called a friend to tell him that I would be taking up a "head-shaking job." That's what my friend always calls administrative jobs. I told my friend that after working for non-indigenous institutes for almost 20 years, I would now be working to fulfill my dream of building a successful First Nations post-secondary institution. My friend said that it sounded like a good job, but that I should remember it is not important what job you have; rather, it is important what kind of Elder you will be.

About the same time, I was talking to a co-worker who had been sober for about one and a half years. She said that when she was not drinking, she found her true feelings. She said, "I don't like them, but they're mine." I am inspired by the courage we find to face ourselves. That is part of our courage to face the task at hand.

As much as I wanted the job at the SIFC, it was very difficult to change things and make the move. I thought that if I just knew what God wanted me to do, I would do it. But I did not know what that was. I was praying to the Creator, asking him to help me do what's best. I finally came to believe that God does not care what job you do;

God cares that you keep on trying to be honest with yourself. As far as I can understand it, that is my task at hand.

Some of the things we will have to face are difficult. We are talking about our children's lives … life and death. Education is a mixed blessing. To explain what I mean, let me share an old story about a man at Pow Wow selling smart pills. A guy came and bought a one-dollar bag. He bit into the smart pill and said, "this tastes like moose crap." The guy at the booth said "see; you're smarter already."

Education is like a bag holding both peanuts and smart pills. There is a reason why we think education is good, useful – that's the peanut. But remember – smart pills are also in the bag. Education makes our children sick. That is the truth in too many cases. Education sometimes teaches our kids that they are not important, less than, not able … That explains the courage we need; we need the courage to sort through the peanuts and the crap.

We need the courage to face the facts, to face our history, to face racism. Racism is an ugly, dirty, nasty word. But the reality is that racism is so much worse than the word. The residential school movement was a symptom of racism, and it was done in the name of education. Racism still exists today. It has not stopped. I am thankful, however, that progress has been made, and that so many people are engaged and care about this issue.

I also think that we need the courage to face the other, to accompany the other, to teach the other. What do I mean by that? I will start my explanation with something that I learned from my non-Aboriginal colleagues; that is to step back occasionally and let Aboriginal people take the lead, to listen to First Nations people talk about the pain, to work side-by-side, and to accompany others. That is something you as counselors do all the time. To be a counselor takes real courage. It means accompanying someone else and realizing that their life is their life. It means trying to make sense of their life on their terms without trying to teach them what you believe. It means giving them respect, an ear, being with them, and trying to understand what makes them who they are without trying to change them. It means letting them change themselves.

I will wind up my talk this morning with a brief story about picking up my grandfather at a time when I was finishing graduate school. I had just come from class where my professor had been telling me how important it was to specify. I was absorbing what he had said. I had tended to be all over the map, and I was taking my professor's advice to heart. After I picked up my grandfather, we were driving through busy traffic, and my grandfather said, "you have to know what's going on around you 360 degrees at all times. You can't specialize; you can't focus on one thing." I said, "you know, sometimes what I am learning in school and what you tell me are the exact opposite." After awhile, my grandfather said, "maybe I should stop teaching you while you get your degree." That was very kind of him. I told my grandfather "no. What you're teaching me is keeping me alive." So my grandpa said, "I guess your challenge, then, is to make the different kinds of knowledge you gain work together."

I want to ask you today to take up that task, as I know you already are. I want to ask you to keep being courageous and take up the challenges we have before us. And I also want to thank you very much for listening to me this morning."

anti-racism toolkit

Presentation by Nora Greenway and Eric Wong

Nora Greenway began the Anti-Racism Presentation with the following comments

"Good morning everyone. It is wonderful to be here and see so many people I know.

Racism is a word we'd all rather not hear. We wish it wasn't a part of our vocabulary, but it has continually impacted on our children.

I am a Stl'atl'imc person. I retired from teaching in 1996. I came back last August to take on the onerous task of tackling racism through the position of Anti-Racism Coordinator with FNESC. There is certainly much work to do in that area, which will require the courage we heard about this morning.

I would like to speak briefly about why my position was created. To do so, I must refer back to the purpose of schools in BC – that is, to ensure that all students have knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enable them to contribute to our building of healthy communities. Unfortunately, that is not the reality now. Statistics show that many of our children are not gaining the education to which they have a right. The transitions for our students have not been smooth. In fact, they have been extremely bumpy.

I feel honoured to be working with a group of people who are committed to effecting positive change to ensure that our children achieve greater success. The Education Partners and Canadian Heritage are to be commended for creating an Anti-Racism Working Group, and for signing the Memorandum of Understanding, which acknowledges the need for greater efforts to support Aboriginal students. I believe that the signing of that Memorandum of Understanding is very powerful.

The Anti-Racism Working Group has developed a creative strategy to address the challenging issue of racism. That strategy involves many components, including the provision of resources to schools that will improve students' understandings of Aboriginal people. We will also be sponsoring pilot projects, and we will look for and share best practices.

Our plan also includes collaborating with the Aboriginal Teacher Education Consortium to encourage education as a career. What more can we do to get teachers in the system? We need greater efforts in that area and we need to demonstrate that we are qualified to take the positions that are available. We can also create more appropriate post-secondary courses for teacher education programs so that those who are teaching our children better understand who they are and what they need.

I believe it is very important that we include Aboriginal students in developing anti-racism programs. Too often, we neglect our young

people in decision-making. I believe that we also have to address internalized racism.

We can all encourage School Districts to develop effective anti-racism tools and goals. If this does not happen, the existing problems will not be eliminated. We need proactive policies, we need them to be implemented, and we need real consequences for racism. Our children are getting to the point where they cannot take any more pressure, and we have to do something about that reality. We can also explore the relationship between racism and bullying, working to make schools safe for all kids.

I hope to see a point in my lifetime when Aboriginal people make decisions on behalf of their children, when we are heard at the education table, when we have curriculum that shows us as we see ourselves, and when we are part of a team that comprehensively addresses the systemic racism that we face in our lives. I know that each of us can do one small thing to make that dream a reality, and that from all of our efforts will come significant change."

Eric Wong then presented a new Anti-Racism Toolkit developed for use in classrooms throughout the province. The Toolkit is intended to raise awareness about discrimination and promote better understanding amongst students. The other goals of the Toolkit are to reduce the level of prejudice that we all hold, to challenge stereotypes, and to cause us all to critique and unlearn what we have learned. The long-term goal is to prevent discrimination, both direct and subtle, and to improve and enhance inter-group relations and create increased harmony in schools and communities. Research is clear about some of the strategies and school interventions that work, and the Anti-Racism Toolkit is meant to facilitate the implementation of those strategies.

opening remarks

Lorna Williams, Director, Aboriginal Ehancements Branch

"Good morning everyone. My name is Lorna Williams, and I am a member of the Lil'wat First Nation. I feel very honoured and privileged to be a part of the team at the Ministry of Education who is working on behalf of our children and youth. I believe that many things have been initiated at the Ministry of Education that are making a real difference, and the key phrase I consistently hear and support is "working together." In that regard, we were very pleased to work with FNESC on this Conference, and I would like to recognize the staff of FNESC and our Branch who worked so hard to make this event happen.

The Conference theme, as you know, is counseling and transitions. I think those are two areas to which we have not paid enough attention. Many of us can think about the times we have been counseled by others – significant people in our families and communities. Counselling plays such an important role in our development. Many of the speakers at this Conference have made it clear that they wouldn't be where they are today without the support they received from others.

We all play the role of counselor at some point. In traditional times, we were all prepared to take on that role, and generally it was not delegated to a special group of people. When our systems were attacked by government policies and practices that was one of the areas that was eroded.

When I travel throughout the province and spend time with people – community members, staff, and students – one issue that people talk about is identity. At each transition point in our lives, from one age to another, from one place to another, from one role to another … when we make transitions, we are coming face to face with our identities and who we are. Every day we are confronted with questions. Who am I? Who have I become? One big step in our lives is graduation, and we are generally quite good at recognizing that milestone. However, we need to also pay attention to the other transitions we make.

There was a time when we were bombarded with the message that in order to get a good education you have to give up your Aboriginal identity. We have challenged that notion, and we must continue to do so. In this country, we are Canada's well kept secret. We are kept secret in the ways in which history books are written, in the lack of preparation for professionals who work with our students, and in the exclusionary practices that still exist. For that reason, I think that the discussions, deliberations, and questions being raised at this Conference are exciting. It is clear that we will not leave the situation as it is. And I am

very excited about the role of counseling in helping to make that happen.

Many issues that exist today are relevant to this event. For example, the provincial government is considering changes to the graduation requirements. The single most important thing we can do is inform our students of the graduation requirements so that they can take full advantage of the choices open to them. Our young people are not being adequately advised about that at present. To address that challenge, we must advise families so that they also have a good idea of what is required.

Given the key role of counseling in our students' success, I am very grateful that we have spent two days on this topic. I know that our efforts won't stop here, and that we will all continue to work together in the future."

keynote address

Maggie Kovach and Sharon Hobenshield, Caring for First Nations Children Society

"Good morning everyone. My name is Maggie Kovach, and I work for the Caring for First Nations Children Society. I am thankful for the wonderful opportunity to be here today among people who work in the area of education. I very much value the work that you all do. I would like to talk to you this morning about a book project we have completed, titled In the Future, First Nations Children Will … Planning Success in First Nations Education. Through this project, we have tried to capture the hopes and dreams that young people have for their own futures.

Before I go into more detail about the book project, I would like to tell you a little bit more about the Caring for First Nations Children Society (CFNCS). We are a provincial organization formed in 1994. We provide services to over nineteen First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies in BC. Those agencies provide some level of child protection services for their communities. Our Board of Directors includes people who are working in family services in their communities, and CFNCS provides professional development, policy analysis, research, and networking support.

In 2001 CFNCS hosted a Conference – First Nations Child & Family Services in B.C: Building on Our Successes. While organizing for this conference, and wanting to capture voices of children and youth, the vision for the book project was born which Sharon and I will present this morning. The conference audience included resource people who work for First Nations Child and Family Service Agencies in the province. The goal of the Conference was to incorporate the voice of children, feel their presence, and leave a legacy for them from the event. We are pleased that we pursued the book project. The book project was carried out in collaboration with FNESC, and the following year both of our agencies were happy to present the book at the FNESC 2002 Integration of Services Conference.

The purpose of the book In the Future, First Nations Children Will … was to hear about children's dreams and hopes for the future. We also wanted to be a part of establishing a future-oriented frame of reference for children and youth. We developed a simple framework we could use when going to communities to capture our children's voices; we asked them to finish the statement – In the future children will… with words or drawings. The book also includes voices of youth, Elders, adults, and social workers. The submissions we received include pictures, poems, stories, and collages.

What we heard through our project is that children see education as integral to their futures. However challenges exist; in the province of British Columbia, 35.8 percent of children in care are Aboriginal. An Indian youngster in Canada has a better chance of being sent to prison than of completing University. The BC Human Rights Commission and the MC Ministry of Education have collected a variety of statistics that clearly highlight the discrepancies between the hope for our young people to access education and the current situation. Is it any wonder that the voices in our project stated: "In the future, children will have a better education and have a better life"?

As Aboriginal people, we know that the education system can be challenging and even painful, but we also know it can be meaningful for students who complete their education. The good news is that graduation rates are increasing, and enrolment in post-secondary institutes almost doubled between 1987/88 and 1996/97.

We know that when people have a future-oriented frame of reference, they will be more successful. We personally thought about our dreams for the future of our Aboriginal children and youth, and we identified the following:

- We want our children to have the knowledge they require. We want them to have access to education, to take the courses they need to achieve their goals.
- We want our children to have freedom. Freedom from labels and stereotyping and ensuring they are free to make their own choices.
- We want our children to be proud of their identity. We want them to know who they are and where they come from, we want them to be strong.
- We want our children to have faith. Our children should be able to take faith for granted – faith in themselves, in their families, in their communities, and in their futures.
- We want equality for our children. All children should feel proud and equal with those around them.
- We want our children to have fun. Nothing is more precious than laughter, and we hope that all children will all embrace the gift of fun and spend more time laughing.
- We want our children to know love. Children the world over must receive the love and care they deserve.
- We would like to close this morning by showing you the artwork that was the initial inspiration for this book. We are very proud of this project, and we thank you for the opportunity to share with you this slide show and our thoughts."

role model panel

Jolain Foster, Roy Charlie, Joyce McBride, Richard Peter, Dawn Thomas

Jolain is a Gitksan person who graduated from the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) with a major in accounting. Jolain is now employed by the UNBC as a liaison officer and advisor. Jolain credits her parents with setting a good example for her, and always expecting that she would go to university.

Jolain Foster —

Good morning everyone. I am pleased to be here this morning to share a bit of information about myself. I received a Bachelor of Commerce degree with a major in accounting. I then started working for Deloitte and Touche, but I moved on to become a recruiter and academic advisor at UNBC.

When I was asked to speak on the role model panel, I initially thought "why me?" Then I began to look at the numbers of Aboriginal students graduating and I thought about the challenges I had faced. I came from a difficult setting. So I asked myself "how did I succeed?" I know it was more than motivation for financial security. I learned that in university. So what was it?

My older sisters were definitely role models for me. I saw them doing homework and I wanted to do the same. But that's not all. I believe that the main reason my sisters and I succeeded was high expectations. My father always talked to us about university and he believed that we would go there. I truly believe that if you set small expectations you'll get small results.

Confidence is also key. I played sports throughout my education, and that made me feel like a valued part of a team. That really helped my confidence, and gave me the courage to ask and answer questions.

I know that I haven't told you anything you don't already know, but I hope that I have reminded you of your important role in encouraging our youth to value and continue their educations. Thank you for that opportunity."

Roy is 23 years old, and a member of the Douglas Band. Roy spoke only his own language until he was 7 years old. He is now on the Youth Committee in his Mission school, and he is trained as a youth advocate.

Roy Charlie —

"It is very good to be here today with all of you talking about our youth, our next generation. I am from Harrison Lake. I grew up with my grandparents because my mother died when I was 9 months old. I am grateful that my grandparents took me in. They taught me my language and heritage. I lived with them for 7 years. Then my grandfather died, and my grandmother and I moved to Mission.

When I started school in Mission, it was very hard for me. I only knew my own language, and I had a rough time. I got my first taste of racism. But my grandmother told me that we came from the land and wouldn't leave it. She told me to hold my head up high, and I did. I started taking ESL and I began working with the First Nations liaison workers. That got me motivated and encouraged me to stay in school. I also took up my First Nations art with an artist who visited me continuously. He taught me art, and to be proud of who I am.

I moved onto the secondary school, but I got kicked out in grade 12. There were no liaison workers involved with that school and that really hurt me. But although I fell down, I got back up and went to the Mission Friendship Centre. I volunteered on the youth counsel there, and we talked together and fundraised. The staff eventually offered to hire me as a youth outreach worker, and through that job I learned so much and was motivated by talking to the youth. That experience was so valuable to me.

After my training at the Friendship Centre ended, I came into contact with Career Dialogues. That contact taught me what I can do in life, and showed me that a good education is important. I will be going back to finish grade 12, and I hope to go on to post-secondary. I am doing that for myself and for my community, as I want to be a role model for young people. I want to show them that learning is important and takes place throughout their lives. Through Career Dialogues, we go into secondary schools, focusing on grades 8 – 10. We try to give youth motivation and encouragement to finish school and go on to reach for their goals.

Eventually, I want to be Chief to make a difference within my community, and I always want to continue my focus on helping youth – the next generation and the future of our First Nations.

Thank you for having me here, and taking the time to talk about how to help our youth understand our rights and reach healthy futures."

Joyce McBride is a third year student in the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP). She is originally from Lytton. Prior to returning to school, Joyce was a school support worker with the Vancouver School District.

Joyce McBride —

"Thank you for inviting me here and for taking the time. I was born in Lytton, BC, but I was put in foster care at 17 months old and I grew up in Winnipeg with non-Aboriginal parents. I was the only Aboriginal child in my school, and I was forced to face racism and stereotypes head on. I had no one to talk to about that, and so I internalized it. At grade 6, I started my journey home. I created a plan for making a home by the river. I learned to stand up when racist remarks were made.

I was surprised when I was asked to speak today. But I think about my struggles and the lack of support I had. I never thought I would be anything. My family emphasized the value of education and work, but what I missed growing up was a connection to my people, my culture, and role models.

As teachers and as individuals we have a role in stopping racism. Racism is name-calling and stereotypes. We have to create publications to change the images that exist. We have to honour our students, learn who they are and where they are from, and help them feel proud. We have to immerse ourselves in pride, respect, and the value of our cultures. Growing up I had no sense of my identity. I am at University now, and sometimes I still think I don't like being Aboriginal. I know that the system has to change so that we can acknowledge the beauty of our people.

Too often, I want to quit and be away from the education system. But others inspired me to realize I can't quit learning how to be a teacher because we as teachers can work on the past, present, and future. We can't ignore the past; we must revive what we can. I can't quit because otherwise my nieces and nephews have no hope. I have done a lot of work with youth, and they are refreshing and re-energizing. Working for the School Board was the most enriching time of my life, when I got to work with young people and their families.

I chose NITEP because it is about identity and pride. My classmates have their languages and cultures. I don't have that, but we are all working together as a community to work towards making the education system better for our children. The encouragement my people give me inspires me to move ahead, be positive, and work toward my goals. There are many Aboriginal role models in this room today, and the fact that you are all here is very encouraging. The journey ahead of us is not easy, but I look forward to my work ahead.

It was good to be here to learn, laugh, and talk, and it helps me to work for change and continue to learn who I am and to be proud. This spring, I learned to honour myself, and as teachers, we are able to honour each child, recognize their strengths, and help them to overcome any challenges they face."

Richard Peter is a Cowichan Tribes member who lives in Vancouver. He has been a paraplegic since the age of 4. Richard plays basketball, tennis, racquetball, and ball hockey, he skis, and he is a leader in other wheelchair sports. Richard is a part of a demonstration team that visits schools to talk about safety and goal setting.

Richard Peter —

"Good morning everyone. I have been public speaking ever since I became so involved in wheelchair sports, and I am pleased to be here this morning.

I was hurt when I was 4 years old when I was going to pre-school. One day, when I was dropped off by the bus, I really wanted to play with my friends on the school bus. The bus driver stopped and backed up over me. That broke my spine, and I'm paralyzed from the waist down. But my situation has never stopped me. My family always supported me, but they also forced me to keep doing things and they always expected me to lead a full life. Because I was hurt at a young age, I grew up with my injury and I learned to make it a part of my life. I went back to school the year after the accident happened and began kindergarten. That started a huge learning experience for both the school and for me. I certainly had to learn to make friends and ask for help.

The education system was actually very good for me. I didn't let racism or physical barriers get in my way. I always said to myself "no matter what, I will graduate," and I didn't let anything stop me.

Physical education class was a turning point for me. I loved sports. In the beginning, I didn't know about wheelchair sports, but I still participated and pushed myself harder so I could keep up with my friends. Back then, wheelchairs were heavy, so I became very strong. I never wanted anyone to see me as disabled but they still did, so I always had to prove to everyone that I could achieve my goals and be independent.

In high school, a wheelchair demonstration basketball team came to speak about wheelchair sports and safety. Seeing that team was inspirational for me. Since then, I've tried almost every different sport, and I've always enjoyed every challenge. Discovering basketball opened many doors for me; I have traveled all over Canada and now internationally. We've had great success, which has been very rewarding.

My goals have always been to meet my own challenges. I am very thankful to my mother and my family; they never let me see myself as disabled. Now I want to help other First Nations people with disabilities move on in their lives and pursue their education. I want to support others in the same way I was supported. I am thankful for being here today, hearing other inspirational stories about people who have overcome obstacles and barriers. Thank you for inviting me to say a few words."

Dawn is 23 years old, and she was born in Smithers, BC. Dawn is a Wet'suwet'en person, and has taken several training courses. She is now a Career Dialogues 2002 trainer.

Dawn Thomas –

"Thank you for being here and listening to me talk about my past and my future. I am 23 years old, originally from Smithers. I left that community at two and one-half years old because I was living in a dysfunctional setting, and I have lived in Mission ever since. That is where I attended school.

I had hard times in elementary school. Because of my home situation, I was in and out of different schools, which made my learning difficult. Racism was also an issue.

Eventually, I did make it to secondary school, but by that time, my self-esteem was very low and in grade 9 I got pregnant. That presented a real barrier for me … having a child as a teen. I am grateful that my school had a post-natal program that allowed me to go back to my education.

I was an honour student until grade 11, but then my life turned around again. Students without children started making plans for the future, but I didn't have any plans. I didn't graduate, and my life went downhill. I became addicted to drugs and alcohol, and I had another baby.

Then, sitting at home one day, I looked at my life and thought, "what will I do?" I began to step-by-step get my life back together. I joined AA, I started Career Dialogues 2002, and I began sharing my story with youth. I talk to young people about career planning so I can inspire them to stay-in-school, get a good education, and think about career goals.

I have learned to be proud of who I am and let go of barriers, one of which was myself. Now I know I can do anything I want, and I want to think about becoming a counselor or liaison officer. I am proud to work with youth now, and help them the way the liaison workers helped me in school when no one else was there. Knowing how I felt makes me want to do what I can with youth.

Thank you for listening and thinking about ways you can help our youth."

Lorna Williams

Thank you to role model panel presenters

"I would like to thank all of the panel members for attending the Conference and demonstrating what we all know – that Aboriginal people have been and continue to be persistent in overcoming barriers. You've shown us that we are all in fact very able. I want to commend you for your courage in sharing with such honesty. I think your stories have inspired us and will stay with us as we continue in our work."

closing comments

The Honourable Christy Clark, Minster of Education and Lorna Williams

The Honourable Christy Clark, Minster of Education –

"Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I would also like to thank the team at the Ministry of Education Aboriginal Enhancements Branch for the excellent work you have done in leading the drive to improvements in Aboriginal education. I know yours is not an easy task, and it will take some time to achieve what is needed.

I am pleased to be here this afternoon to close what I know was a very successful Conference. This event certainly shows the commitment you all have to achieving what every Aboriginal child deserves – what every child deserves – the best education that it is in our power to provide. That is the greatest gift we can give our children. Sometimes it is a tough slog, and it feels like there is not enough change as quickly as we would all like. But I believe that our efforts will be worthwhile in the end.

I know that particular credit is due to FNESC and their work to focus the attention of everyone on education issues. Too often, Aboriginal children are forgotten in the system. We know they start falling behind in the early grades. That does not mean that the students are failures. It means that the system has to change. We also know that successful education is about successful partnerships of parents, teachers, school districts, First Nations advocates, community members, and school counselors. My father was a school counselor, and I spent some time before coming today thinking about what he would want me to say. I think he would want us to remember that our work is not about adults, it's about kids. We need to talk about them every single time we talk about making a change in the system.

We must address the pressing issues not only in schools. We must always think about the larger context, remembering the kids in their communities and in the rest of their lives. To promote greater parental participation, we need to rethink the way the school system communicates with and involves parents.

At the Ministry of Education, we want all districts to have Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements in place by 2005. Through those agreements, districts will have clear goals, and because the agreements must be negotiated with Aboriginal communities we will know that they were involved in setting the goals. Far too often, school district members have not even talked to First Nations. Many districts have taken positive steps, but we cannot stop now.

This year, for the first time ever, we will be implementing a second nominal roll count in February. That count will provide school districts with an incentive to keep kids in classes. The School Act changed to allow the Ministry to implement that second count. Retention is tremendously important, so we need to change incentives to ensure it is a focus for everyone. We must celebrate school districts that have had success in retaining students and help those that have not.

Many schools have reached out to parents. Other districts have implemented effective programs. In some cases, Elders and communities have been involved in decision-making and curriculum design. Those are very exciting developments.

But we still need more First Nations role models in schools. That is what will ultimately make a difference. Every one of you here is a role model because you have come to show your commitment, and show your interest and belief in your ability to make a difference. First Nations people value history so deeply. You also have a special view of the future. I know that's why you are here today, and I know we will achieve success in this area thanks to all of you and your efforts."

Lorna Williams —

"Well, it has been a great Conference, and it is time for the close. There is a feeling that comes into a room when people are working in unison, and I feel that in the last two days we have achieved that feeling for our children. I felt it especially today when I heard the role models tell their stories. We know their stories are not unique. What is important about the role models is their persistence, and their ability to move beyond the barriers that are in place. I think that the workshops were excellent and allowed us to learn from one another. And I know that we will be able to organize an even better Conference next year. Finally, my friends, I ask the creator to help each of us find our path."