



Strengthening the Beat of the Drum: Urban Aboriginal High School Reform at Oskāyak High School

September 2014

**A Joint Nomination by:
Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools**

and the

Kihtōtēminawak Council

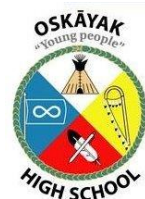
for the

**2014 Premier's Board of Education Award for
Innovation and Excellence in Education**

Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Board Chair: Diane Boyko

Kihtōtēminawak Council Co-Chairs: Irene Oakes & Chris Sicotte

Director of Education: Greg Chatlain



About the Project

On a rainy and cold National Aboriginal Day - June 21, 2014 - a group of dignitaries and First Nations students stand holding umbrellas and binders over their heads to protect themselves from the weather. Saskatoon's mayor, city councilors, the Catholic school Board chair, its director of education, the Tribal Chief and many others huddle with the students, who are focused on the flag being raised on the new flagpole outside Oskāyak High School. Oblivious to the officials that they are shoulder to shoulder with, the students witness the raising of the Treaty Six flag while the drums play the Treaty song.

How we got to this historic occasion, like many others at Oskāyak, is the result of student initiative. In this instance Larryn Oakes and Andre Bear took the lead. Larryn's grandfather was the late Gordon Oakes, a respected Treaty Elder. She stood at the mike and emotionally honoured the teachings of her grandfather; tears mixed with rain. Larryn and Andre conceived the initiative, petitioned the Board to erect a new flagpole, researched flag protocols, sought out the flag and planned the event. It was an extraordinary undertaking, but commonplace at Oskāyak. Students are welcomed into a context of support and encouragement. Despite what they may have encountered elsewhere along their educational journey, students learn that First Nations language and culture are paramount at Oskāyak. Students are liberated from their subordinate self-image and learn to explore their curiosities and take control of their learning.

After 30 years of the school's existence, the Board challenged its administration over the complacency that had set in at Oskāyak and wondered whether the school was the best that it could be in an era of heightened priority for the success of First Nations and Métis youth. Oskāyak has always been referred to as an *associate* school of Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools; governed jointly by the Board and the Kih̄tōtēminawak Council. The Council is comprised of parents, guardians, and other community members. Its members are referred to as *keepers of the vision*. Amid changing provincial school policy and community expectations, Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools trustees confirmed their commitment to the partnership with the Council and motivated change to strengthen outcomes and demonstrate their commitment to the partnership and the hard work of school improvement.

To tell the story of the turnaround, it is necessary to paint a picture of the context in 2009-2010. The attendance rate of the 154 students had fallen to approximately 52 per cent. Students were achieving credits at the abysmal rate of 31 per cent. The 2010 graduating class consisted of three students. Rising to the Board's challenge of once again having Oskāyak serve as the flagship of First Nations and Métis student success, board administration set out to reinvigorate the Kih̄tōtēminawak Council. Working with the remaining Council members, the Council and administration recruited a full slate of Council members and began a renewal effort. The Board developed a program renewal committee that undertook a program redesign in the areas of cultural programming, student supports and academic program. The redesign sought to achieve success through student engagement by ensuring that student voice and participation were underpinning every aspect of the school.

Culturally Responsive Program

While Oskāyak has always enjoyed a strong cultural program, the past five years have seen the deliberate integration of cultural knowledge and ways of knowing in classrooms, extracurricular activities, school celebrations and student leadership opportunities. Students are apt to be learning about Treaties in Art class, traditional pursuits in Wellness, beading design patterns in Math or traditional seasonal names in Science. After school will see students rush to drumming practice or a dance performance. The year is punctuated by sage harvesting, powwows, feasts, round dances and sweats. Students gather with staff and discuss current events such as federal government bills or missing Aboriginal women. The school's mandate is to serve the whole person in mind, body, spirit and emotion. Nehiyaw (Cree) culture underpins everything at Oskāyak and provides a solid foundation for success.

Student Supports

The fastest growing segment of the population in Saskatchewan is First Nations and Métis youth. In 2013-2014, Oskāyak High School hosted more than 300 students from 51 First Nations across Saskatchewan. Of these, 56 per cent were living independently, 20 per cent had children of their own and many required support to alleviate the effects of poverty.

The student support program provides transportation assistance, a breakfast and lunch program, individual, family and addictions counseling, daycare services, Elders, social workers, a nurse and a home/school liaison worker. The major achievements in student supports in the last five years include the opening of a 34 space daycare, a kitchen remodeling sponsored by PotashCorp and a wellness program that provides students access to a slate of wellness services including a pediatrician.

Renewed Learning Program

The most innovative aspects of the program turnaround include credit recovery, the infusion of technology, and adoption of problem-based and inquiry learning. These pedagogies allow for the creation of "cultural space" in which students can connect their knowledge and experience to curricular outcomes. Credit recovery is as much a learning process as it is a program. With the use of technology, student learning modules are tracked so that interruptions in attendance no longer mean "starting over." Students are able to resume the class from where they left off. The school has a state-of-the-art Mac lab complete with a 3D printer, poster printer and a green screen. Students in the lab are typically shooting video statements, photographing cultural art pieces for the online student store or developing webpages. All classrooms have access to mobile technology labs. Students most often have a laptop or tablet handy as they engage in group-work or individual classroom assignments.

Partnerships

Oskāyak's dynamic learning program is enlivened through key partnerships in the education and business communities. Strategic partners include the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative, which launched the Youth Entrepreneurship Program in 2010. The University of Saskatchewan has many

intersections with Oskāyak through the colleges of Law, Arts and Science, Education, the Edwards School of Business and the Department of Native Studies. Oskāyak also partners with *Kohcita*, the charitable wing of the Aboriginal Human Resource Council on an electronic youth mentorship program. Oskāyak has also partnered with Microsoft to assess and ready the school to support the development of 21st century competencies among students.

Goals

The goals of the program renewal focus on those elements that were most difficult to achieve among the Oskāyak student population: enrolment, attendance, credit delivery and graduation. The program consists of many elements that constitute a robust student engagement program. These elements serve as the foundation for the deliberate and targeted program goals:

- Increased Enrolment: The starting point was approximately 150 students. The goal was to attain a core student population of 250 students in order to offer a diverse course selection and extracurricular activities. There are currently more than 300 students registered at Oskāyak.
- Increased Attendance: The baseline for attendance was 64 percent in 2010-2011. The attendance goal was a modest 10 per cent increase. Attendance for the 2013-2014 school year averaged nearly 80 per cent.
- Increased Credit Delivery: The unacceptable credit achievement rate of 31 per cent was targeted to break 60 per cent in five years. Credit delivery reached a sustained high of 81 per cent in spring 2014.
- Increased Graduation: Graduations are most easily targeted by numbers rather than completion rates in a highly transient school. The goal was to have graduations increase to the typical range of 12 to 15 students annually. Graduations reached 55 students in June 2014.

Selection Criteria

1. Evidence of direct Board influence and participation in the innovation

The Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools Board of Education has been instrumental in the Oskāyak High School program redesign and school turnaround. A significant catalyst for the intervention was the Board's inquiry to administration regarding the program's effectiveness when the school's 2010 graduating class comprised three students. Prior to this, the Board had maintained an arm's length relationship with Oskāyak due to the nature of its Tripartite Agreement with the Kihitōtēminawak Council and the Ministry of Education. 2010 marked the beginning of the Board's new investment in Oskāyak

Shortly after the Board's inquiry, the certainty around the unique funding structure of the tripartite agreement was called into question as a result of changes to the educational funding formula. In 2011-2012, the Board was faced with the choice of adopting Oskāyak into the fold as a school like any other within the division or continuing to support the tripartite relationship and advocating for sustainable funding commensurate with the unique needs of Oskāyak's student body. The Board confirmed its commitment to the agreement and the unique relationship with the Kihitōtēminawak Council.

In 2012, trustees initiated a recalibration of funding from the Board so that Oskāyak saw its fair share of student support grant resources. This exercise reset the financial commitment of the Board toward Oskāyak and ensured that the students who were being considered in the calculation of the student support grant were being recognized and that their needs were ultimately being met. The Board reflected this revised resourcing calculation in its 2012-2013 budget approval.

The Board has remained abreast of the innovations at Oskāyak, has championed the development of partnerships and has vigorously participated in celebrations of the school's success over the past five years. As recently as the Board's strategic planning event in spring 2014, trustees have confirmed their desire to foster relationships with the First Nations and Métis communities. They see Oskāyak serving as a pathway to enhanced collaborative relationships with First Nations and Métis communities and organizations.

2. Innovative nature of the program or project

School turnarounds are typically a result of many small innovations that ultimately result in an innovative program. Comparing the outcomes at Oskāyak to like-contexts serving a high First Nations student population, innovations are defined not only by myriad program changes but by the school culture redesign. The innovations at Oskāyak include:

- **Shared Governance:** The Board's relationship with the Kihitōtēminawak Council affords the local community a level of participation and accountability useful in pursuing unique program innovations and promoting community partnerships.
- **Inquiry and Problem-Based Learning at Scale:** Faculty are selected and/or trained to deliver a program through problem-based learning. This innovation has dramatically heightened student engagement and has enhanced student participation in their learning.
- **Unique Modes of Delivery:** Through combined credit courses, hybrid electronic and in-person courses, the adoption of the quarter system and credit recovery options in all courses, Oskāyak has dramatically increased credit delivery.
- **Student Engagement:** The prolific use of technology and the grade 12 Indigenous study tours are two of the innovations that foster student engagement. The grade 12 class has fundraised for the past five years to travel to various locations including New Zealand, New Mexico, Hawaii and now Costa Rica. This international travel has been a major catalyst in keeping senior students engaged and capturing their imaginations in regards to opportunities available to them with school completion and career choices.

3. Sustainability of the innovation within the present system or school

Oskāyak has experienced many iterations of new programming over the past 30 years but few have created lasting change. Throughout the turnaround at Oskāyak, the Board has advocated for deliberate interventions that meet specific student needs in order to ensure sustainability of results. Keys to sustainability include the accountable use of core funding in order to avoid the false economy of one-time funding injections.

Also key to the sustainability of the school's successes is the careful selection and assignment of staff. The Board undertook broad recruitment of staff to ensure that the faculty represents a balance of cultural competencies and instructional leadership, and possesses the desire to foster relationships with students and community. Staff is also selected to ensure they can participate in and contribute to the robust technology learning milieu at Oskāyak.

Mostly, sustainability is arrived at by ensuring that the most lasting change occurs where it matters most: in the classroom. The foundation of the program is quality teachers being accountable to their students. This characteristic was built during more than five years of diligent instructional leadership by administration and ensures that the changes leading to today's successes will remain in place far into the future.

4. Cost of the innovation related to benefits achieved

To fully appreciate the cost-benefit of the innovations at Oskāyak, it is important to consider the unfortunate trajectory of many First Nations and Métis youth in Saskatchewan schools. According to the Provincial Auditor (2012) First Nations and Métis youth in Saskatchewan graduate grade 12 three years after entering grade 10 at a rate of 32.7 per cent compared to 72.3 per cent for all students. The Gabriel Dumont Institute (2011) reports that among First Nations youth who do not graduate high school, their average lifetime earning potential is \$362,023 for males and \$202,279 for females. Those First Nations youth who graduate high school have potential lifetime average earnings of \$796,762 and \$497,788 for males and females respectively. Those who attain a post-secondary certificate have an earning potential of \$999,511 and \$757,689 for males and females. With a university degree, average lifetime earnings jump to \$1,469,756 and \$1,382,858 respectively. A projection based on the 2010 Oskāyak grade 12 graduating class of 3 of 26 students, not accounting for later school completion or post-secondary, predicts an average lifetime earning potential of approximately \$324,000. The 2014 graduating class at Oskāyak, with 55 of 87 students graduating, represents an average lifetime earning potential of approximately \$513,000, not accounting for later school completion or post-secondary.

Of the 55 students who graduated in spring 2014 from Oskāyak grads, eight students already provided confirmation by September 2014 of enrolment in a four-year university program while two students were enrolled in a two-year college program. There are also a handful of students who are currently struggling with funding barriers and are not able to attend post-secondary education at this time. This, as a very early indicator, represents a transition-to-post-secondary rate of 18 per cent and already raises the average lifetime earning potential of the 2014 graduating class to approximately \$590,000, not accounting for later school completion or post-secondary.

5. Client support for innovation

Students

"Oskāyak is the only school I've ever been to that taught me to follow my culture and traditions and inspired me to focus on my academics so I can go to university. . . . I completely changed since I came

here and I'm going to help not just my people but I'm going to make the world a better place.” (Tyre, grade 12 student)

The greatest endorsement from Oskāyak clientele is the school's ever-increasing enrolment and attendance. The five-year average of student enrolment prior to the 2010 intervention and turnaround was 188 students. Since 2010, the average enrolment has rocketed to 261 students.

Parents

“We have a different worldview and different belief system and teachers at Oskāyak understand this. I worried that my daughter was never going to graduate. . . . I give thanks each day for this school because my daughter has so much confidence now. It's like she's not afraid of tackling anything in her life.” (Celeste, parent)

Parents and community members have also demonstrated their support for the Oskāyak program. The Kihitōtēminawak Council experiences the consistent participation of approximately 10 council members. Besides parents, the council has representatives from First Nations organizations, post-secondary education, and business and industry, representing some of Saskatchewan's most progressive community and corporate citizens.

Partnerships

“When Oskāyak High School began to implement the Aboriginal Youth Entrepreneurship Program, our Senior Account Manager jumped at the chance to mentor more than a dozen grade 11 students to write plans for the businesses that they wanted to launch – everything from T-shirt making to Aboriginal ringtones. So inspired was she by the relationships that were built that we are confident that these students may soon join one of the fastest-growing entrepreneur groups in Canada: Aboriginal business owners.” (Royal Bank of Canada, partner organization with the Martin Aboriginal Education Initiative)

Partnership participation has increased dramatically at Oskāyak. Community partners, including post-secondary institutions, employers, corporations and First Nations and Métis partners, routinely seek out partnerships with Oskāyak. Partners are eager to collaborate on the successes that see Oskāyak students move beyond inertia and wheel-spinning to real successes and access to the many community opportunities that school success affords them.

In 2014, Oskāyak High School received honourable mention from the Canadian Education Association for the Ken Spencer Award for Innovation in Teaching and Learning. This prestigious recognition was a welcome endorsement for the hard work that has been undertaken at Oskāyak and is a celebration of the successes of the students.

6. Evidence of improved student achievement

While many program elements contribute to improved student outcomes, the success of the program is measured in enrolment, academic participation, credit delivery and graduations.

Student enrolment has increased 71 per cent in the past five years. There have been no significant enrolment drives or marketing campaigns during this period. Students report that their peers encourage their participation and that they see other young people doing well and believe that Oskāyak is a school where they can overcome their barriers and succeed.

Beyond the overall enrolment increase, Oskāyak has experienced a 58 per cent enrolment increase in senior maths and sciences. This speaks volumes in terms of the students' desire to achieve credits that will help them access a variety of professional programs.

Most significantly, the credit completion rate has increased from 31 per cent in 2010 to 81 per cent in 2014. Enrolment matters little unless students are being retained in class and ultimately achieving credit.

A graduation rate of a school with a transient population is difficult to measure because of the lack of consistency of variables. The best way to demonstrate the ability of Oskāyak High School to graduate students is by witnessing the five-year history of graduate numbers:

School Year	Graduates
2009-2010	3
2010-2011	30
2011-2012	42
2012-2013	50
2013-2014	55

Conclusion

The successes at Oskāyak High School can be articulated through numbers. The real successes, though, are evident as one walks through the old brick school building on Broadway Avenue. Students will assemble in the foyer and lead a morning drum song. Others gather in a corner digitally videotaping statements on politics and community issues. Some dazzle onlookers with their immense skills in digital media and music production. A group plans participation in an Idle No More rally. Young men and women gather around the Elders, seeking protocols for an upcoming cultural celebration. Then there are the many students lingering in class, discussing algorithms, poetry or current events with their teachers. A typical school? Oskāyak is a collection of small innovations yet it is characterized by one simple but all too rare innovation: it has changed to meet the needs of its First Nations and Métis students, rather than forcing its students to fit the school. It is an innovation of the best kind: one that is replicable and easy to adopt with commitment, flexibility and respect.