

Research/Identify Problem or Need

Historically, Canada's original people have endured great injustices, all well documented. Ontario's Ministry of Education recently launched a province-wide initiative to improve learning environments and outcomes for First Nation, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students, which they outlined in the *Ontario, First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Policy Framework*.

The Simcoe Muskoka Catholic District School Board established three goals to support the Ministry's initiative and to help our FNMI students reach education and career objectives: 1. Collect accurate data on enrolment, student success and graduation rates, 2. Determine program needs and 3. Identify student supports.

Establishing a Voluntary Self-Identification process was a key step. Simply put, we didn't have a mechanism in place to identify FNMI students in our schools and therefore had no way of knowing what supports and programs may be needed to improve learning outcomes.

Establishing an identification process for our schools, without extensive consultation and communication, would have been met with fear and mistrust. This flows from a flawed and broken historical relationship between all levels of government and Canada's FNMI people. It is commonly known that Aboriginal students experienced systemic abuse at the hands of educational institutions throughout our country. The aftermath still impacts FNMI students and community, so developing a communication strategy that was sensitive to this context was critical.

For a productive and successful self-identification process, communication and consultation goals were established:

- To develop user-friendly and culturally sensitive communications materials to raise awareness about our Board's project, called *Making Good Tracks*, and to create an understanding about the province-wide initiative
- To gather input on FNMI student challenges and seek direction on ways to support student success
- To obtain feedback and direction in regards to the implementation of a *Voluntary Self-Identification Policy*
- To ensure every staff member (approximately 4,000) in our Board was educated about the *Making Good Tracks* project
- To ensure that all 22,000 students and their families, from our 53 schools, were aware of *Making Good Tracks* and were provided with a sense of safety to self-identify as being FNMI
- To pilot the Voluntary Self-Identification initiative at a target school in our board
- To engage at least 10% of the FNMI populace within the urban centres known to have a high Aboriginal population according to census (approximately 3,000)
- According to census data approximately 3% of the total Canadian population is Aboriginal. In the first year after launching our self-identification process, our goal was to have 1% (approx 1/3) of the potential Aboriginal student population voluntarily identify as FNMI.

Planning/Analysis

Targeted Audiences - FNMI students and their families, Aboriginal groups and community stakeholders, elders and leaders in the Aboriginal community, all of our school communities, staff, media and general public.

Involvement of Others - Community consultation was vital. For the first time in our Board's history, we had an opportunity to consult with our FNMI communities to increase our cultural understandings and better support student success. Involving others was critically important, to maintain cultural sensitivity and ensure that we were truly meeting the needs of our audiences, while building new relationships. As a starting point, we sought community input on the development of our project theme (*Making Good Tracks*), our logo (which incorporates symbols from our three target communities) as well as our consultation plan. The logo and theme became a recognizable brand for the entire initiative.

The formation of an internal working group and an Elders' Advisory Council to guide and advise was invaluable. Their input was key in developing communications materials (from information packages, brochures and website information to the *Voluntary Self-identification Policy*). All material was provided to these groups for feedback in advance.

A wide range of consultation activities took place throughout this initiative so that members of the community could share their input and ask questions about the project. Consultation groups included: Aboriginal Education Advisory Circle, Métis Nation of Ontario, Georgian Bay Friendship Circle and the Barrie Native Friendship Centre.

A Variety of Communications Channels Used - A survey using our look and brand was developed. More than 300 members of the community participated in a range of activities, which took the form of one-on-one interviews, large and small community gatherings, group presentations, home visits and an interactive display booth. Participants also received a wealth of information (fact sheets, backgrounders, news releases, progress reports, etc., as part of the *Making Good Tracks* information kit all with our consistent look and brand). In addition, more than 1,000 information packages were widely distributed throughout FNMI communities. The most current information is available on our district website as well as 43 school websites. We are currently finalizing a DVD to further communicate this project. An electronic newsletter will be utilized to provide updates and links with the community in addition to providing culturally appropriate resources for teachers.

Implementation/Communication

Timeline

Communications Technique

Winter 2008 – Spring 2009	Ongoing community consultation. Finalize <i>Making Good Tracks</i> information kit with the look and brand and print 5,000 for distribution at community consultation sessions and provide copies to each full-time staff member in the board. Finalize the <i>Voluntary Self-Identification Policy</i> and develop a comprehensive plan to promote and implement the program. In addition to the kit and print material – other collateral materials included a banner and a display that lent a presence to the consultations and continued to emphasize the look and brand
Spring/ Summer 2009	Continue promoting awareness of the program via community events, PowerPoint presentations, website, media relations. Chose a school to pilot the self-identification policy. Developed an information brochure to be sent home to every family at the pilot school. Based on feedback from pilot school, revise communications material in preparation for board-wide rollout in fall 2009.
Fall 2009	Board-wide rollout of <i>Voluntary Self-Identification Policy</i> . Every student received an information brochure. Voluntary self-identification for FNMI students becomes part of registration process for 22,000 students in our board.
Winter/ Spring 2010	Evaluation of project and compilation of consultation results. Developed final report called <i>Community Members Speak – First Nation, Métis and Inuit Education Kindergarten to Grade 12</i> . Print final report for presentation to Board of Trustees, Ministry of Education and distribution to key stakeholders. Report included on district website. Report findings will provide the foundation for the strategic planning for the infusion/integration of Aboriginal content and in support of student success.
Ongoing	Evaluation, consultation, communications updates, development of programs, support mechanisms and showcasing of success, which will all continue to use the look, brand and culturally sensitive language.

Quality of Written & Graphic Material – Meticulous consideration was given to writing and designing communications material for this project. Developing culturally sensitive material and terminology (often through painstaking research and consultation) took careful consideration and a significant amount of time. However, it also played a vital role in the overall success of this project. Other districts throughout the province took a less consultative approach – in some cases, resulting in further alienating groups and impacting the success of their Aboriginal education initiatives. The high quality written and graphic material from our board is now widely used throughout the entire province as an example of “best-practice.”

Evaluation

- Comprehensive, user-friendly and culturally sensitive material was developed and is widely recommended by the Ministry of Education as a best practice example. Below are examples of the success of our communications materials.
- During consultation with FNMI groups, participants said the package was inviting, culturally visual and captured the diversity of FNMI in a respectful way. They reiterated that they didn't understand the importance of the initiative until they reviewed the kit.
- Two delegates from the Government of South Australia visited our district on recommendation from the Ministry of Education. They were interested in modelling their Aboriginal education initiatives on our materials – both the look and content. They left with 25 kits to share with other education portfolio holders in Australia.
- York University's Consecutive Teacher Education Program requested presentations on our process and 50 copies of the kit were provided for teacher candidates as part of their Aboriginal Infusion Initiative.
- Our district was invited by the Ministry of Education to present at a conference in the City of Toronto. 72 school districts from across the province of Ontario were in attendance and received our material.
- We met our goal of engaging 10 % of the Aboriginal population in our targeted areas. More than 300 members of the FNMI community participated in consultation activities and received copies of *Making Good Tracks* packages.
- Through a range of consultation (and participation of more than 300 community members) we gathered extensive input on FNMI student challenges and sought direction to support student success. We obtained valuable feedback and direction regarding the implementation of a *Voluntary Self-Identification Policy*. All feedback was captured in the *Community Members Speak* final report.
- Because of the ongoing consultative nature of this initiative we had built-in evaluation mechanisms. We were continuously receiving feedback/evaluation of our material and processes and making changes/updates based on this feedback.
- More than 2,000 staff members received packages as part of a professional development day and provided positive feedback
- The Voluntary Self-Identification Pilot project had an immediate & positive impact on the FNMI students and the school community in general. It provided an opportunity for parents to identify gaps in the information and fine-tune our process & materials prior to the board-wide launch
- 22,000 voluntary self-identification brochures were distributed to students in our board
- Following the launch of the self-identification process in September 2009, 1.14% of our student population voluntarily self-identified as being FNMI. This is 0.14% greater than our goal of 1%.
- In 2008/09, only 0.11% (of the estimated 3% according to census data) of our student population was identified as FNMI. In 2009/10, this number increased to 1.14% (of the estimated 3% according to census data) of our student population. This is a 984% increase in number of students who have been identified as FNMI.
- Now that students have been identified, we can begin to develop programs and supports in order to improve learning outcomes for success.

Making Good Tracks

In Canada, First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) people have experienced great injustices at the hand of government. In particular, it is commonly known that students experienced systemic abuse within educational institutions across the country. In response to this, the Province of Ontario introduced a new policy framework to help improve learning environments and outcomes for FNMI students.

Our Board responded by developing an extensive strategy to support the province's policy – we call our strategy *Making Good Tracks*. A key part of this strategy was developing a comprehensive and culturally sensitive communications plan. Our communications planning involved extensive consultation so that we could overcome an overwhelming fear and mistrust felt by our target audiences.

Two key goals for *Making Good Tracks* were to engage 10% of the FNMI populace in our consultation process and to have approximately 1/3 of our potential FNMI students voluntarily self-identify as being FNMI. In order to achieve these goals, we consulted heavily within the FNMI community to develop culturally sensitive communications material. This included developing a “look and feel,” drafting appropriate terminology and writing material that would overcome communications obstacles and meet the needs of our target audiences.

Our approach was very successful. Our communications planning helped us meet the two key goals for this initiative. In addition, our communications material is widely used as a “best practice” throughout the province and elsewhere.

