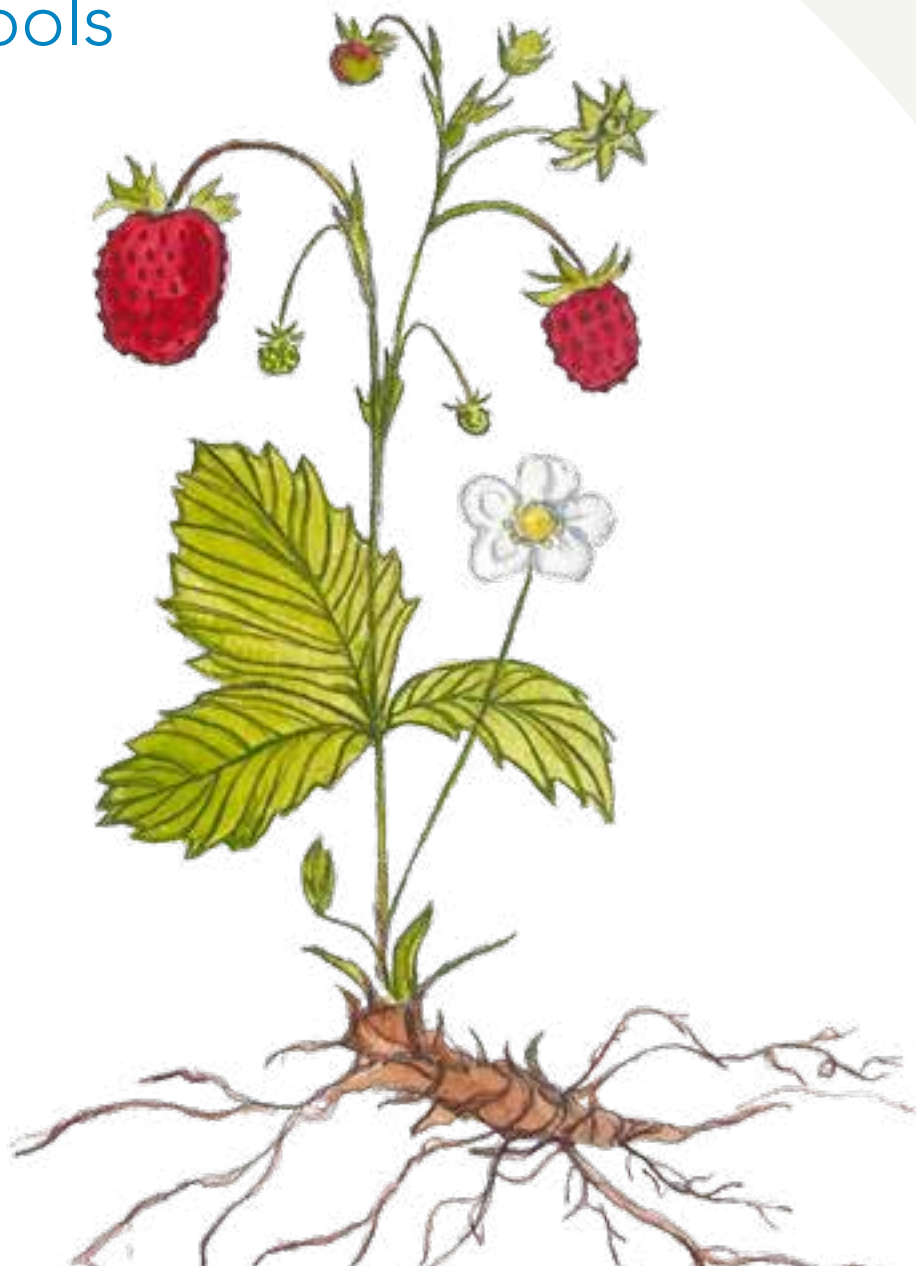


## Leading Reconciliation in Rural Schools

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Visual representation created by Brie Phillips.



This research was partially funded through a grant from the McDowell Foundation. However, the points of view and opinions expressed in project documents are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Foundation.

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# Introduction

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*The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015)* documented the history and enduring impacts of the residential school system and issued 94 *Calls to Action* to guide governments, institutions, and communities in advancing justice, healing, and renewed relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. The Report reveals how education was misused as a means of assimilation and cultural erasure, which has caused deep and lasting harm for generations of Indigenous families. Yet the Report also positions education as a critical path forward for healing and reconciliation. In particular, Call to Action 63 urges the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to transform this legacy by actively supporting Indigenous student success and fostering greater understanding, empathy, and respect for Indigenous histories, cultures, and rights across all students. Citing education as one of the most powerful tools for building renewed relationships, schools are situated at the heart of reconciliation efforts, creating spaces where students can cultivate authentic understanding and mutual respect.

## National and Provincial Direction

Nationally, the Council of Ministers of Canada (CMEC, 2023) has prioritized Indigenous education since 2004. The release of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2015) intensified this commitment, prompting collective national action among provincial ministers of education. Since then, CMEC has played a role in coordinated national efforts by hosting national Indigenous Education symposiums and developing strategic plans to guide this process. Most recently, the *CMEC Indigenous Education Plan 2023-27* outlines three priority areas: promoting equity, anti-racism, and allyship; advancing language, culture, and identities; and nurturing well-being in all learning environments.

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education outlines renewed priorities for First Nations and Métis education in the 2018 update of the *Inspiring Success – Building Towards Student Achievement: First Nations and Métis Education Policy Framework*. The renewal process created opportunities for the Ministry to engage with the Métis Nation – Saskatchewan and First Nations education authorities in the strategic planning, deepening relationships, and shared ownership. Grounded in the recommendations from the *TRC Final Report* and the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)*, this collaborative work positions Indigenous knowledge systems, cultures,

and languages at the centre of educational policies and curricula in Saskatchewan. This provincial framework aims to foster a more equitable and inclusive education system that benefits all learners and provided key guideposts for reconciliation education efforts across the province.

Through the Provincial Education Plan, school divisions align localized plans with the Indigenous Education Priority Actions. In the 2024-25 annual report, each Saskatchewan school division documented specific actions undertaken in support of this priority action. The Sun West School Division's 2023-26 Education Plan identifies three overarching priority areas: achievement, engagement, and well-being. Indigenous education and reconciliation are embedded rather than treated as a stand-alone priority. For example, the Sun West achievement priority includes a target to "actualize the goals of *Inspiring Success: PreK-12 First Nations and Métis Education Policy Framework*," while the engagement priority commits to "enhancing engagement and understanding of diverse perspectives."

To assist divisions in setting targeted goals that reflect contextual needs of each public-school division, the School Boards Association (SSBA, 2022) developed the *Indigenous Education Response Framework*. The framework was designed to animate and operationalize the goals of *Inspiring Success* (2018). The IERF informs decision making related to Indigenous education across all levels of a division by prompting evidence-informed reflection on current practices and future direction. This tool has been used by Sun West School Division to assess progress, identify areas for growth, and guide strategic planning aligned with provincial priorities. In doing so, it supports decision-making related to Indigenous education across all levels of the division.

## Sun West School Division – A Rural Context

All school divisions bring distinct histories, relationships, and geographies to their reconciliation journeys, and this Saskatchewan division is no exception. Situated in a predominantly rural region with a geographically large catchment area, the division serves a network of 42 schools, including 19 Hutterian schools, with a September 30, 2025, enrolment of 4,872 students whose self-declared identities are diverse. While no First Nations communities exist within the division's boundaries, three neighbouring communities—Mosquito First Nation, Red Pheasant Cree Nation and Whitecap Dakota First Nation—offer potential partnerships for education. The local economy is driven largely by agriculture and oil and gas, shaping community life, family work patterns, and the contexts in which students and educators understand land and place. Together, these features create a distinctive context for reconciliation work, requiring approaches that honour neighbouring Nations, attend to rural realities, and respond to the division's specific demographic profile.

Reconciliation in Sun West School Division is guided by Division Board Policy 19: Indigenous Education (2024). This policy focuses on ensuring equitable achievement outcomes for First Nations and Métis learners while ensuring all students gain knowledge of historical context and Indigenous contributions, perspectives, and ways of knowing. Additional guidance is provided through the *Sun West School Division Education Plan*

(2023-2026), the *Indigenous Education Plan (2021-2027)*, School Learning Improvement Plans, and professional expectations for school-based administrators that are outlined in the *Sun West School Division Administrator Handbook*.

## The Research Gap

The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2015) proposes that research within educational contexts is necessary “to learn about the circumstances in which reconciliation either fails or flourishes” (p. 241). Likewise, the *CMEC Indigenous Education Plan 2023–27* emphasizes the importance of documenting promising practices and challenges experienced in the K-12 educational sector to help guide future directions for reconciliation efforts. As school leaders are tasked with navigating diverse community perspectives, research is necessary to understand how schools are responding to the *Calls to Action* and how these initiatives are influencing progress towards the TRC goals (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2021). Although interest in educational leadership in Canada is growing, limited research exists that examines school leadership in rural communities. This gap means we know less about how rural school leaders work within their unique geographic, cultural, and resource contexts, underscoring the need for more studies focused on rural school leadership in Canada (Ryan, 2003; Wotherspoon & Milne, 2021).

Rural schools operate within distinct contexts that shape what reconciliation leadership looks like and how the *Calls to Action* can be meaningfully implemented. Rural leaders often work with smaller staffs, experience broader role expectations, and have more limited access to specialized services, professional learning, and funding opportunities than their urban counterparts. In rural Saskatchewan, historical and contemporary political dynamics have contributed to the separateness of Indigenous communities, often resulting in misunderstandings regarding issues such as hunting rights, taxation, and access to federal funding (Epp, 2008). At the same time, grassroots, face-to-face initiatives in schools and communities have potential to generate some of the most meaningful reconciliation work when individuals and communities can find common ground. Close-knit relationships and deep community histories can create powerful opportunities for land-based learning, community partnership, and locally grounded approaches to reconciliation that are less feasible in larger urban systems.

To contribute to the larger conversation around reconciliation efforts within K-12 school divisions, this study investigates how administrators enact reconciliation efforts within a rural Saskatchewan school division and how principals perceive their impact. By sharing the experiences of rural administrators, we seek to illuminate how promising practices are contextualized in local communities with the resources available to them.

# Part One – The Research Process

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## Action Research

This study focuses on how principals in a rural Saskatchewan division enact reconciliation leadership in their everyday work. By attending to their stories and experiences, we seek to reveal the practical approaches, barriers, and opportunities that shape efforts to build renewed understandings and more authentic relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in their communities.

To investigate these questions, we used an action research approach to explore reconciliation leadership among K-12 administrators in rural Saskatchewan. Action research is a practical and collaborative approach to solving real issues in education, in which researchers and practitioners work closely (Stoecker & Bryson-Miller, 2013). It emphasizes building knowledge through relationships and involves participants directly in shaping both the questions explored, and the actions taken. Through a cyclical process of inquiry, planning, action, and reflection, action research helps address local challenges and generates meaningful improvements informed by participants' experiences (Miles, 2018; Stoecker & Bryson-Miller, 2013). We selected this approach for its emphasis on learning through practice and its potential to support actionable social change within participants' communities and more broadly within the division.

## Research Questions

This study was guided by a central question: *How are rural K-12 administrators in one Saskatchewan school division experiencing and leading reconciliation within their schools?*

Four research questions shape this inquiry:

- What strategies and actions are rural K-12 principals undertaking to advance reconciliation in response to the TRC *Calls to Action*?

- In what ways have these activities increased understanding of Indigenous worldviews and the history and legacy of residential schools?
- How have these practices strengthened relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within the school division?
- What challenges and opportunities do rural leaders face when advancing reconciliation?

Together, these questions informed the design of the study and provided the analytical frame for interpreting participants' stories and experiences.

## Decolonizing Methodologies

Decolonizing methodology is central to this study because it engages directly with issues affecting Indigenous students and families in Saskatchewan schools. In light of the harmful history of research being conducted *on* rather than *with* Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous researchers must work closely with Indigenous partners, critically examine their positionalities as white settler researchers, and attend to the ongoing effects of colonialism (Aveling, 2013; Regan, 2010; Schick & St. Denis, 2003). This orientation shifts the focus from the researcher's agenda to the needs and priorities of Indigenous communities and calls for a stance of humility, accountability, and ongoing learning.

Decolonizing methodologies emphasize creating relational, ethical, and culturally relevant spaces in which Indigenous knowledge systems guide the questions asked, the methods used, and the interpretations offered (Smith, 2012; Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Such approaches prioritize respect, reciprocity, and relational accountability, continually asking who benefits from the research and how it might support Indigenous self-determination (Kovach, 2005, 2009; Wilson, 2008). In this study, our approach is shaped by a commitment to centring Indigenous voices and perspectives, building and sustaining strong relationships with Indigenous communities, and adopting a strengths-based stance that recognizes the knowledge, resilience, and contributions of Indigenous students and families (Gebhard, 2017).

Genuine decolonization requires more than symbolic gestures or add-on initiatives; it calls for disrupting entrenched patterns and power imbalances within schools and systems (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Failing to name the dominance of European perspectives and colonial narratives in education makes it impossible to challenge or transform them (Schick & St. Denis, 2003). The kind of transformative change envisioned by the TRC requires leaders to understand Canadian history from the perspectives of those who were colonized, to acknowledge both historical and ongoing harms, and to interrogate how dominant school narratives can position non-Indigenous educators as caring and well intentioned while casting Indigenous students and families as deficient, damaged, or disengaged (Gebhard, 2017).

Within the Saskatchewan context, the *Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework* (IERF, 2022) offers one concrete mechanism for supporting this type of systemic disruption. Building on calls for substantive school reform (Smith, 2016), the IERF provides a structured pathway for divisions to examine and transform the status quo

by prompting critical reflection on policy, practice, and governance. It encourages educators and leaders to interrogate bias, collaborate with Indigenous families and communities, and embed Indigenous perspectives and relationships across all aspects of schooling, including assessment, language programming, curriculum, and decision-making. Through cycles of reflection, dialogue, and action, the IERF is intended to move divisions beyond surface-level change toward sustained, systemic transformation in Indigenous education.

Such decolonizing work depends on honesty and sustained self-reflection from everyone involved, particularly those from non-Indigenous backgrounds who have benefited from colonial systems. It entails asking difficult questions about privilege, power, and complicity and recognizing that it is often easier to talk about cultural “difference” than to confront historical and contemporary race privilege in Canada (Regan, 2010; Schick & St. Denis, 2003, 2008). White settler educators who engage with counter-narratives may find the process of unlearning to be unsettling, and principals leading this work must be prepared to navigate emotional discomfort and resistance. In this study, reflexivity is understood as an active and ongoing practice of examining one’s positionality, biases, and influence on the research process (Carlson, 2016). Our research team engaged in continuous reflexivity by critically reflecting on our social locations and methods throughout all phases of the study and documenting challenges, evolving questions, and emerging insights in team meeting notes, which helped us monitor shifts in understanding and highlighted the complexities of undertaking decolonizing research from the standpoint of settler allyship.

## The Research Team

Indigenous researchers emphasize that locating oneself in relation to research is a foundational ethical and methodological practice, acknowledging that researchers are never neutral but bring their history, identity, and relationships into the research (Kovach, 2009). Research is inherently relational: the researcher’s self-location clarifies their responsibilities, establishes accountability, and builds trust with participants and community (Wilson, 2008). Situating oneself as a researcher involves openly sharing who you are, where you come from, and which relationships and experiences shape your worldview and approach to inquiry. As part of honouring Indigenous ways of knowing, it is important to make this visible because relationality and connection to people, land, and community are at the heart of Indigenous knowledge systems. In what follows, each member of the research team offers a brief self-location to ground this study in our distinct, but interconnected, identities and responsibilities.

### Angela Sparks

I am a third-generation Canadian from a white European settler family. I was raised on a farm in the area encompassed in Sun West School Division. I have always been interested in the voices less represented in my educational experiences, from my time as an elementary student in Sun West through to my undergraduate and graduate studies in Saskatchewan. I was raised with the value of respect and care for the land that produced my family’s livelihood but did not connect this teaching to Indigenous ways of knowing until my graduate studies in education.

As a teacher, I've spent many years in differing urban contexts in Western Canada. Returning home to this area as a mother and a school leader has given me the opportunity to lead critical conversations and share my own journey towards allyship.

### **Brie Phillips**

I am a mixed Indigenous person, with both Métis and European heritage. I am a teacher and an artist, drawing inspiration from the land and people around me. I grew up in a small town on the border of Saskatchewan and Manitoba. My happy place was camping out at Sandy Beach along the South Weir, surrounded by more trees than people. I grew up connected to the land but didn't feel connected to my Métis culture; it was something that I began learning more about, and connected to, as an adult in university. I grew up in a Northern Indigenous community, yet I didn't learn the full truth of the history between the Canadian government and Indigenous peoples until I left my little town and moved even further North. I was deeply angry and heartbroken as I learned more—I discovered that I was passionate about social justice, raising up Indigenous voices, and protecting the land. I made a promise to myself to turn my anger into something that made a positive difference. I strive to help make changes through education, storytelling, and connection. I am grateful to be in my third year of working as the Indigenous Perspectives Learning Consultant for Sun West School Division.

### **Donna Locke**

I identify as a Euro-Canadian settler raised on a multi-generational family farm in southern Saskatchewan. My Prairie upbringing shaped my connection to land, community, and rural ways of knowing, which continue to influence my work as an educator and as a consultant for new Canadians and Hutterian colonies.

My personal and professional identities are closely tied to Saskatchewan—its histories and its diverse communities. Much of my career was spent in a proud Cree community that welcomed me with culture, tradition, and teaching. My work centred on anti-racism and cross-cultural education, which I later carried into my consulting role with the Saskatoon Tribal Council, where I learned from Saulteaux, Dakota, and Cree Elders. Their guidance continues to shape my responsibilities as a settler educator.

As I deepen my understanding of Indigenous histories, newcomer worldviews, and contemporary realities, I recognize the ways I have benefited from colonial systems. My reconciliation journey involves ongoing reflection, learning, and action, grounded in humility and a commitment to building meaningful, respectful relationships.

### **Jade Ballek**

I identify as a third-generation Euro-Canadian settler, both living on and making a living from the land's generosity. In this place, I am a mother, grandmother, wife, farmer, and rural educator. These interconnected roles shape my perspective and inform the fabric of my identity. For over 30 years, I have worked in the heart of Saskatchewan's Prairies where I have served in both school-level and division-level leadership roles.

This area is primarily driven by an agricultural economy and, for most of my career, I have worked in culturally homogeneous school settings. The absence of Indigenous voice in the community in which I live and the schools where I have worked has

impacted my personal understanding of Indigenous history, culture, and contemporary issues. In response to the *Calls to Action* in 2015, I have focused much of my personal learning on developing a better understanding of a different narrative about Canada's history. Through this journey, I am awakening to the ways in which I have been an unconscious benefactor of a colonial system and am actively engaged in "unsettling" my settler identity.

My interest in learning more about principals' experiences in leading reconciliation is in response to my own uncertainty about how to engage in this work during my time as a rural principal. Learning alongside Indigenous teachers, colleagues, and friends, reconciliation has taken on a deeper meaning as we work together to decolonize education through discussion, reflection, and positive action.

### **Kim Fick**

I was born to a settler family on the Saskatchewan prairies and spent my childhood in rural communities in West Central Saskatchewan. A self-described "townie," I was not raised on the farm but grew up surrounded by family and friends whose livelihood depends on the agriculture in our area. In the communities in which I was raised there were few meaningful connections to First Nations and if so, it was as an afterthought and not in meaningful ways. Through my graduate and post-graduate studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and in my time as a school-based administrator, my learning expanded through fortunate opportunities provided to me through my professional experiences. When I expanded my viewpoints and became more aware of the inequities and disparities for our Indigenous students and families, my thoughts turned to wondering – How can I help? What can my impact be?

Through my career, I have been afforded opportunities to advance my own learning about Truth and Reconciliation, to recognize my own privilege, and to reflect on how I can be an ally. I believe we all have a responsibility to share and understand our history and to actively work to improve outcomes for Indigenous children and families. With a passion for school-based leadership, for recognizing and addressing barriers in our system, and for working together with families, my hope is that this important research will result in change.

### **Stacy Becker**

I am a white, cisgender female, 55-years-old, and identify as middle class. I am Canadian, born and raised on a farm in rural Saskatchewan, and my upbringing in this setting has deeply influenced my understanding of community, land, and education. I spent 18 years living and working in Northern Saskatchewan, where I had the privilege of learning alongside Indigenous students, families, and educators. These experiences continue to shape my perspective and commitment to reconciliation.

I hold both a bachelor and a master's degree in education. My master's work focused on Educational Foundations, with a particular emphasis on anti-racist and land-based education. Over the past 29 years, I have worked in public education as a classroom teacher across multiple grade levels and subjects and have also served as a vice-principal and principal. I currently work in a rural school division in south-central Saskatchewan.

As a settler-educator, I recognize the responsibility I carry in leading reconciliation efforts within rural schools. My work is grounded in a commitment to equity, relationship building, and creating learning environments that honour Indigenous voices, histories, and ways of knowing. I approach this research with humility, acknowledging that reconciliation is an ongoing journey that requires listening, reflection, and action.

## Ethical Considerations

Throughout this research, ethics of care were upheld by centring decolonizing methodologies and prioritizing engagement practices rooted in respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relevance. Integrating Nel Noddings' (2002) ethics of care into action research brings a humanizing and relational approach to school improvement; emphasizing empathy, trust, and reciprocity at every stage of the research process (Ostendo, 2024). For action researchers, this means placing care for relationships at the centre of their work, reflecting on how data collection, analysis, and reporting may affect participants, and continuously engaging with stakeholders in ways that foster genuine mutual respect and well-being. Noddings' framework underscores that educational research is not just about generating findings but also about recognizing and attending to the impact of research on individuals and school communities.

Gordon (2012) suggests that reconciliation requires leaders to commit to genuine, collaborative relationships with Indigenous partners, working together to address challenges authentically. In this study, the research team honoured cultural protocols by seeking permission, using preferred terminology, and valuing guidance from Knowledge Holders and Elders. Grounding the project in the "Four Rs" of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and relationship (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) and relationality (Wilson, 2008), the project was shaped by the voices and wisdom of Indigenous collaborators, with explicit attention to power and privilege as our commitment to ensuring that outcomes are meaningful and accountable to community priorities. The research team expresses deep gratitude to the Indigenous colleagues, mentors, and friends whose generosity and partnership guided this work.

## Participant Recruitment

Balancing the value of the proposed research with the lived realities of school leaders' workload, the research team carefully considered how to invite busy school principals to share their experiences in leading reconciliation within their schools. Participation was entirely optional, and interested administrators could indicate their willingness to participate in one or both phases of the study: an anonymous online survey and a subsequent invitational, face-to-face focus group. The research team also recognized that some principals might view themselves as being at an early stage in their reconciliation journeys and therefore feel uncertain or reluctant about participating.

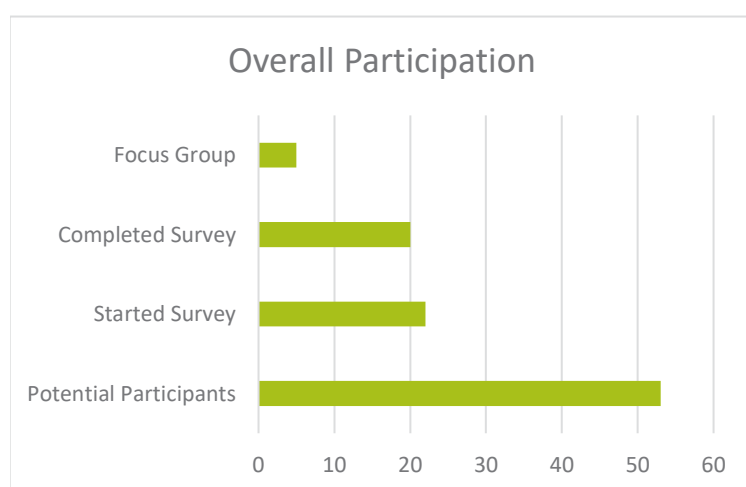
Recruitment began with an open invitation distributed electronically to all eligible administrators through school division communication channels. The invitation outlined the study's purpose, procedures, and ethical considerations, including assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation. In addition, members of the research team

provided an overview of the research goals and intent at two school-based administrator meetings. To address potential hesitancy, administrators were assured that all perspectives were important, including those who felt they were just beginning this work.

Aiming for broad representation by gender, experience, and cultural background where possible, the research team sought to recruit school principals and vice-principals from both colony and non-colony schools within Sun West School Division. To ensure diverse perspectives from various school and community contexts, the invitation to participate was extended to 53 school leaders (40 principals; 13 vice-principals) across 42 schools (23 non-colony schools; 19 colony schools).

Recruitment processes also acknowledged existing power dynamics. To reduce any risk of perceived pressure or conflict of interest, the team member holding a senior leadership position did not participate in the focus group, and a principal serving on the research team was also excluded from participation.

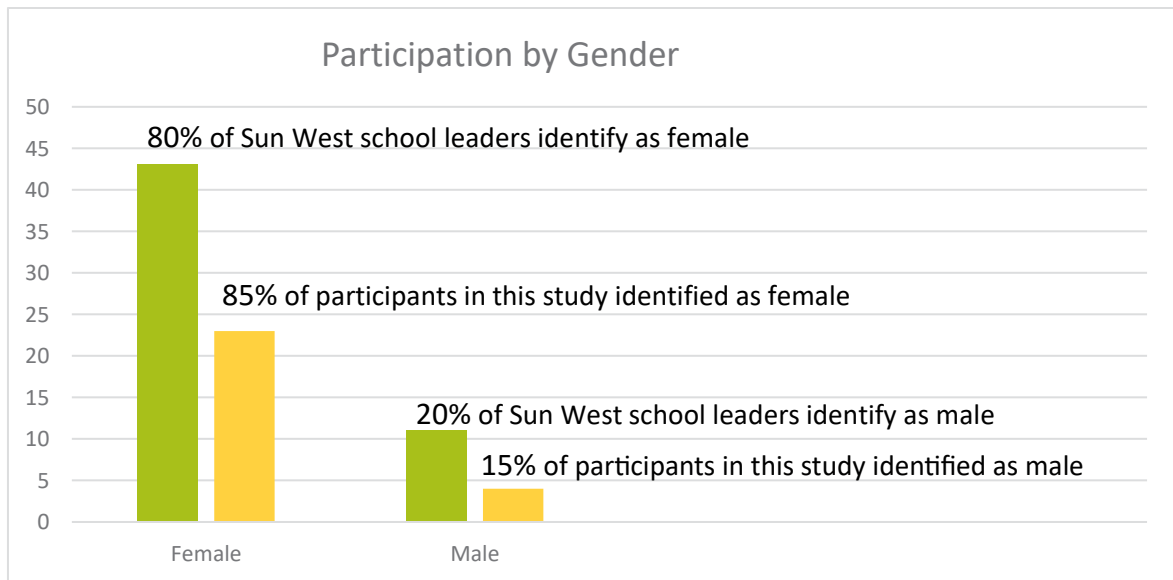
## Participation



While the leadership roles of principals and vice-principals differ, the study did not distinguish between them in its analysis as reconciliation leadership is often a shared responsibility in schools with more than one administrator. Participants were not asked to identify whether they worked in colony or non-colony schools, reflecting a focus on their experiences rather than on school type.

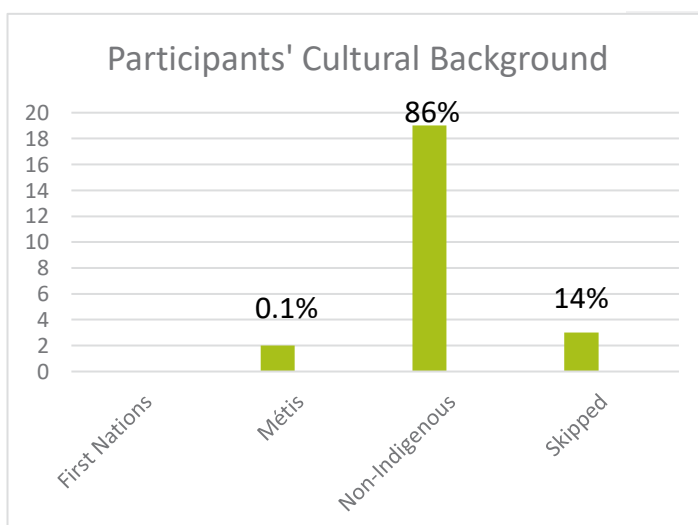
Twenty-two administrators began the survey, with 20 completing all questions. Five administrators volunteered to participate in the focus group. Overall, 35 per cent of eligible school administrators from Sun West participated in the research project.

## Gender



Although this study does not report findings disaggregated by gender, collecting gender information allowed the research team to consider whether certain perspectives were under-represented in the study and whether participation reflected current leadership demographics. Survey participants were asked to identify their gender but had the option to skip the question if preferred. A review of school division demographic information indicated that the gender distribution in this study closely aligns with actual leadership demographics.

## Cultural Background

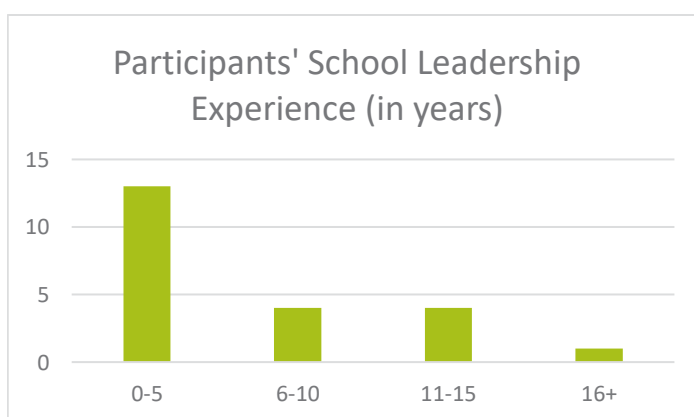


Because a leader's cultural background can shape their worldview, communication style, and approach to reconciliation, inclusion, and community engagement, participants were

invited to identify their cultural background. Cultural background can also intersect with systemic privilege or marginalization, influencing how leaders perceive and enact their roles in diverse school settings.

In this study, the vast majority of Sun West administrators participating in this study identified as non-Indigenous while 14 per cent of participants chose not to answer this question. The decision by some participants to skip the cultural background question raises important, but unanswered, questions. While the reasons for this choice are not known, the decision to skip this question may reflect personal, professional, or contextual factors such as potential discomfort with disclosure, uncertainty about how the information would be used, or concerns about how identity is categorized in institutional settings. This raises important questions about how demographic information is requested, understood, and experienced by school leaders in the context of reconciliation-focused research.

## Years of Leadership Experience



In a study examining differences between new and veteran school leaders' approaches to reconciliation in Saskatchewan, Osmond-Johnson & Turner (2020) found that while both groups faced challenges, more experienced leaders reported a greater capacity to engage in sustained advocacy and to bridge the "ethical space" between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, while new leaders often sought mentorship and guidance to build this same capacity. In the present study, survey participants were asked to indicate their years of leadership experience as principals and/or vice-principalship using four ranges (0-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16+ years). At the time of the data collection, most Sun West administrators who responded had been in their roles for five years or fewer. Although this study does not report findings disaggregated by level of experience, years in leadership are likely to shape how principals perceive and respond to reconciliation-related policies, initiatives, challenges, and opportunities. The fact that most participating administrators had five or fewer years of leadership experience invites further questions about how experience shapes reconciliation leadership, including differences in confidence, advocacy, reliance on mentorship, and the sustainability of reconciliation initiatives over time (Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020).

## Data Collection

To ensure the validity and trustworthiness of this research, the study employed several best practices for qualitative inquiry (Denizen & Lincoln, 2017), including:

- Data triangulation through the use of both online surveys and focus group discussions, allowing themes to be corroborated across sources.
- Protection of confidentiality during the recruitment and consent process, with all identifying information removed from transcription notes prior to analysis and findings reported in ways that prevent identification of individual participants, schools, or communities.
- Member checking, whereby focus group participants were given an opportunity to review transcripts and clarify or add to their contributions.
- Secure digital data storage on password-protected devices with access limited to authorized members of the research team.
- Clear emphasis on voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time as part of the consent process.

Together, these strategies strengthened the credibility and ethical integrity of the study.

## Online Survey

Experiences and perceptions of school leaders were initially collected through an anonymous online survey distributed to all principals and vice-principals in Sun West School Division. The invitation to participate in the survey was originally communicated at the school-based administrator meeting in the spring of 2024, but no time was provided during the meeting for completion as participation was voluntary. At that time, contract negotiations between the government and the Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation had stalled, and the possibility of sanction action was at the forefront of conversations and pre-planning, likely contributing to low participation in the survey. In response, a second invitation to participate was extended in the fall, following the settlement of the contract and after the summer break.

The survey invited participants to:

- Identify school-level reconciliation efforts aligned with *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2015).
- Assess the impact of these actions on personal, staff, and student understandings of Indigenous worldviews and the historical and legacy of residential schools and related policies.
- Reflect on the strengthening of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples within schools.
- Consider the influence of personal learning and professional networks on leadership decision making related to the *Calls to Action*.
- Describe challenges, opportunities, and perceived resource needs for ongoing reconciliation work.

These questions provided an initial overview of reconciliation-related practices and experiences across the division and informed the development and focus of the subsequent focus group phase.

## Focus Group

Following the survey, administrators were invited to participate in a face-to-face focus group. The intent of the focus group was to provide additional opportunities for a small number of administrators to share their perspectives, deepening the understanding of how reconciliation efforts are led in different school communities. Stories from the focus group informed the analysis and are reflected in the broader thematic statements. This session fostered open dialogue about lived experiences, strategies, and barriers to leading reconciliation, providing space for personal narratives, critical reflection, and collective insight.

To minimize potential discomfort and perceived power imbalance, the research members who co-facilitated the focus group did not hold supervisory roles related to any participants. Two members of the research team transcribed the discussion, and pseudonyms were assigned in the final transcript to help preserve anonymity. However, given the small number of administrators in the division as well as the close-knit leadership community within Sun West, it remains possible that some of the stories could be informally associated with particular schools or principals. These limitations were carefully considered when interpreting and reporting the focus group findings.

## Data Analysis

The analysis process in qualitative research allows researchers to review and interpret data to reveal patterns and relationships (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). In this phase, our research team used an iterative, collaborative approach that included becoming familiar with the data by reviewing the survey results and focus group transcripts multiple times to immerse ourselves in participants' voices and stories. We examined participants' feedback for patterns in their actions, experiences, and insights, paying particular attention to moments when they learned something new, faced challenges, or described shifts in understanding.

Participant narratives were central to this process. These stories helped us capture the day-to-day realities of reconciliation work, illustrating both what is working well and where difficulties remain. We connected the specific steps taken at the school level to broader system issues that shape reconciliation leadership, particularly in rural communities. As we grouped responses into categories (themes), our team worked iteratively to ensure that these groupings accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives shared by principals.

Five distinct but interrelated themes emerged from the analysis. There is no hierarchical relationship among the themes; rather, ideas from each area are woven together to create a holistic understanding of how school principals are leading reconciliation in Sun West. The overlap among themes underscores the interconnectedness of reconciliation work. Administrators were also invited to identify ideas, actions, hopes, and dreams for

moving this work forward, and their responses are reflected in the final theme. Findings from this study are presented in the following section.

Centring Indigenous ways of knowing in the sharing of experiences and insights, the five themes have been visually connected to the strawberry plant, a powerful symbol in many Indigenous worldviews that represents growth, renewal, and interconnectedness. Strawberry plants thrive in nutrient-rich soil, tended to with care and attention. Just as every part of the strawberry plant, including roots and runners to blossoms and fruit, contributes to the health and vitality of the whole, individual themes similarly contribute to the larger journey of reconciliation in rural Saskatchewan schools. The visual metaphor created by Brie Phillips illustrates how a commitment to reconciliation in K–12 school leadership is deeply rooted in relationships, community, and both personal and collective growth. When nurtured through both individual and systems-wide commitment to collective action, efforts have the potential to produce transformative change for Indigenous students within our school communities.

# Part Two – Emerging Themes

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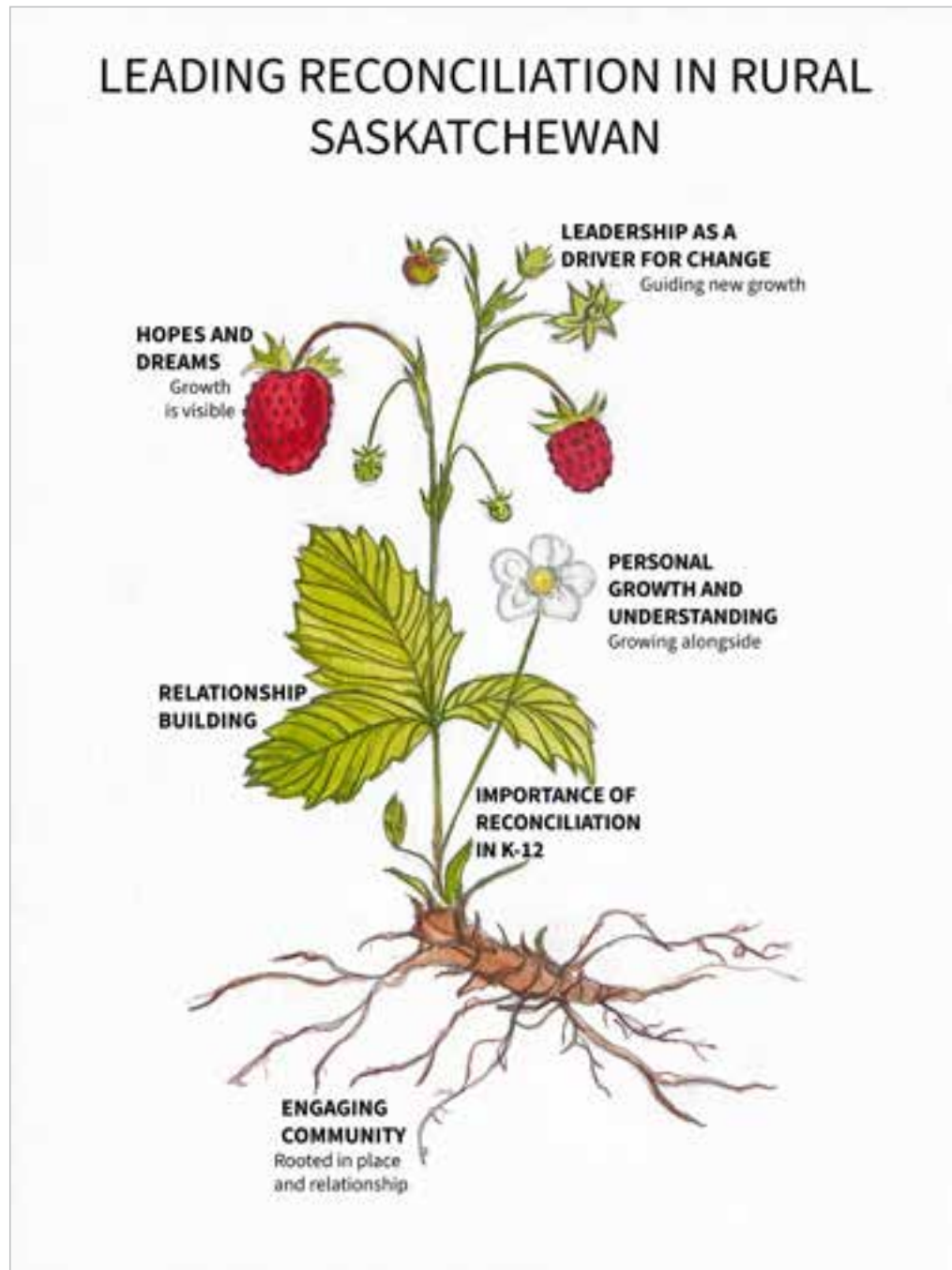


Figure 1 – Visual representation created by Brie Phillips

# The Importance of Reconciliation in K-12 – Theme 1

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***“Students need to experience and hear the truths for them to be able to understand the importance of reconciliation.”***

– Participant



Reconciliation in K-12 education is recognized as a foundational priority in Saskatchewan, shaping how schools support the academic, social, and cultural success of all learners. The Provincial Auditor found that between 2018 and 2021, only about 45–48 per cent of Indigenous students graduated within three years of starting Grade 10, compared with about 88 per cent of non-Indigenous students, and that these rates have remained relatively unchanged—despite targeted initiatives (Provincial Auditor of Saskatchewan, 2023, 2025). In a province where about 17 per cent of the population identifies as Indigenous, and where a large share of Indigenous people lives outside major urban centres (Statistics Canada, 2022), these disparities are much more than merely statistics; they reflect ongoing inequities and lost opportunities for Indigenous youth and communities in this province.

Identifying historical injustice and ongoing inequity as a root factor of the achievement gaps impacting Indigenous students, Indigenizing education has been a key priority for national and provincial education leaders. Elder Calvin Racette clarifies that this work is “not just taking Indigenous content, incorporating it into a Western system, and evaluating it using a Western model. Indigenizing education is learning content from an Indigenous viewpoint. The children must see themselves in the curriculum.” (CMEC, 2022, p. 18.) School leaders and teachers have a responsibility to ensure Indigenous students are successful without having to leave their Indigenous identities behind. (Goulet & Goulet, 2014.)

## Education and Action

Sun West participants identified that K–12 education in Saskatchewan has the power to drive meaningful reconciliation, with school leadership playing a pivotal role in this work. Survey results showed that 100 per cent of participants felt they had a responsibility in advancing reconciliation within their school community, emphasizing the centrality of reconciliation in K–12 education. In the survey, one administrator stated their position allows them to “make changes from a root level, here at a K-12 school, starting with the youngest and moving up this continuum to the oldest student in the building, including the adults.” Participants also made connections between their experiences and the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Another administrator wrote, “I do believe that moving forward starts with educating citizens on what the *Calls for Action* mean and the importance of them. If citizens can better understand they will better support and take part in the effort. Our influence in schools is significant, and I feel it is our duty to do what we can to support the work. We need to foster understanding, empathy, and healing through this work.”

Such statements reflect a desire to improve relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and provide opportunities for all students to experience First Nations and Métis cultural learning in school spaces. Reinforcing the leadership role in creating space for meaningful action, another participant observed, “I think that we understand the importance of reconciliation and that there’s really no other place for it to start than in the classrooms ... It’s our job ... giving the teachers that have the passion and the capacity, the space to do that.”

## Addressing Sun West Demographics

Highlighting the demographics of this school division, one survey participant observed that being in a “community where we have no Indigenous people” can be a barrier to reconciliation. Another remarked that their school has very few students who self-identify as First Nations. These comments reflect current demographics, suggesting that reconciliation may not be perceived as important in some school and/or community settings. Throughout the six years of the TRC’s work, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous witnesses from across Canada reiterated that reconciliation is a shared commitment but also indicated that “the concept of reconciliation means different things to different people, communities, institutions, and organizations” (*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2015), p. 17). Equally important is that non-Indigenous children and youth learn how their own identities have been shaped by a version of Canada’s history that has supported “notions of European superiority and Aboriginal inferiority” (p. 185) resulting in damaging relationships. Saskatchewan Education invites teachers to recognize the influence of cultural contexts on learning and how their own cultural background influences their current perspective and practice. Renewed curricula for all subjects and grade levels offer teachers a pathway forward to actualize First Nations and Métis ways of knowing. By failing to meet the needs of Indigenous students, Goulet and Goulet (2014) argue that schools demonstrate “a form of institutional racism” (p. 41).

## Systemic Barriers

In addition to cultural and historical understanding, reconciliation in education must address the impact of institutional policies and practices which hinder Indigenous students (Battiste, 2013; Ryan, 2003; Shah, 2018). Stepping in to stop racism when racial comments are witnessed is an important response for allies (LeMay, 2025). Challenging racism at work and in the community can be difficult, but it is important for school leaders to model the kind of behaviour needed to create an inclusive school community. Several participants described hearing deficit-based or dismissive comments about reconciliation around them outside the school setting and struggling to nudge people along in ways that maintained relationships while still challenging harmful views. Recognizing the discomfort in challenging such comments, LeMay (2025) offers practical strategies for non-Indigenous allies to consider when reacting to racism that might provide a starting point for leadership development.

In addition to the experiences of individual acts of racism, larger systemic barriers have given differential access to services through the *Indian Act*. Institutional racism may not be as visible to educators as it has long become the status quo. Shifting beyond cultural understandings, anti-racist and decolonizing perspectives provide opportunities to engage in deeper conversations around racialization in education and its impact on both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. The public education system “also needs to be influencing behaviour by undertaking to teach our children – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal – how to speak respectfully to, and about, each other in the future. Reconciliation is all about respect” (*Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2015), p. 236).

School and division-level leaders play an integral role in providing opportunities for educators to challenge existing ways of thinking about Indigenous student success in a way that provides support and understanding to all (Tompkins, 2002). The TRC (2015) asks that “teachers receive appropriate training and support, including direct dialogues with Survivors” (p. 237). Acknowledging that this kind of unlearning is necessary to establish a renewed relationship built on reciprocity and respect, such disruption can be understandably difficult. Examinations of the impact of unseen colonial practices in classrooms, settler teacher identities, and power and privilege can be unsettling, often resulting in the silencing of discussion or avoidance of these topics (Schick & St. Denis, 2003). Emotional discomfort for allies may come in many forms, including righteous anger, sorrow, guilt, and/or defensiveness (LeMay, 2025). Working through such emotions in a way that does not distract from the pain and loss experienced by Indigenous children and families ensures that leaders can continue to guide with integrity and compassion. However, principals may feel unprepared to deal with resistance, both subtle and overt, from the community (Swanson & Welton, 2018). These dynamics point to the need for division-level support that not only affirms the importance of reconciliation but also helps staff explain why this learning matters for all students, even in communities with relatively few self-identified Indigenous residents.

## Staff Readiness

Survey comments and focus group conversations highlighted how principals and vice-principals navigate a wide spectrum of staff understanding of reconciliation, comfort, and commitment to reconciliation. A principal acknowledged that to engage in conversations meaningfully, people must “come into it with an open mind and be able to connect the concept to all students. If the mindset is not open to considerations of openness and change for growth, a person is beat before they start.” One focus group participant observed that “all of our students and staff and community members are at different places,” underscoring the complexity of this work. A survey participant explained that working with the division Indigenous Perspectives Consultant has helped increase the comfort level of both the administrator and their staff. Another respondent indicated a need for additional support “when teaching students/staff on the why we are doing this,” noting that “in an area where we have very few people who identify as Indigenous it is hard to explain why.” The TRC (2015) suggests that developing personal relationships in communities where contact between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is “minimal or marred by distrust and racism” (p. 307) is equally important. Learning what it means to be treaty people can be a starting point for such connection. This highlights the delicate balance between respecting individual readiness and ensuring progress. Together, these perspectives indicate that while readiness varies, school leaders must both support and challenge staff to move forward in reconciliation efforts.

In a similar study conducted by Osmond-Johnson and Turner (2020), staff readiness to engage in reconciliation work was identified as a major constraint on principals’ efforts to respond meaningfully to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* in Saskatchewan schools. Non-Indigenous principals in this study reported that many teachers had limited knowledge of Indigenous histories and perspectives, uneven confidence in teaching Indigenous content, and varying degrees of openness to engaging in reconciliatory work. This complicates how rural principals might actualize reconciliation leadership at the school level.

# Leadership as a Driver for Change – Theme 2

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***“We believe school leaders play a pivotal role in creating a school culture that values and works towards inspiring hope.”***

– Participant



Building on the understanding that reconciliation in education is both urgent and deeply important, this study invited participants to reflect on current school leadership practices as well as the impact of reconciliation efforts within their school communities. Principals shape a safe, inclusive environment for all students, navigating challenges that arise throughout the reconciliation journey. As instructional leaders, principals are responsible for guiding staff in integrating Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into teaching. In rural communities where most principals also teach, modelling culturally responsive teaching practices is also important. Survey results and the focus group discussion confirmed a shared belief of participants that school leadership is widely recognized as a key force in moving reconciliation efforts forward in education. Reconciliation efforts gain true momentum only when they are woven into policies, classroom experiences, relationships, and community engagement which is supported by both individual leaders and the broader educational system.

## Supportive System Level Leadership

Educational leadership for reconciliation is a shared responsibility requiring system-wide alignment among all levels of the K-12 sector. Across Canada, national, provincial and territorial, and division-level commitment can serve as the backdrop for the decisions made by school leaders. System-level leadership was highlighted by participants as pivotal in advancing reconciliation efforts within schools. Many participants expressed that division-level backing “gives us the confidence and support to take steps in building relationships,” and described how leadership helped “build capacity” across the division rather than leaving reconciliation efforts solely on the shoulders of individual staff. Administrators valued divisional actions such as providing dedicated personnel such as the Indigenous Perspectives Consultant, Brie Phillips, to support this work. “Getting Brie full time has been huge,” observed one principal.

As another participant remarked, “The division supports any PD that we put forward ... I feel we’ve gotten division support on those,” illustrating the importance of having both resources and encouragement to move reconciliation from intention to action at the school level. This coordinated leadership not only removed barriers but also fostered greater collaboration and empowered schools to find authentic pathways for embedding reconciliation into daily practice. In this context, leadership was seen as a sustained, collective effort. One survey participant acknowledges the IERF rubric shared at a school-based administrator meeting has been a useful tool in trying to “level up in the areas of inclusive Indigenous perspectives.”

Participants emphasized that system-level leadership must ensure schools and communities have access to essential resources for reconciliation. Specifically, participants identified the need for additional human resources, financial supports, and ongoing professional development opportunities. System leadership plays a critical role in allocating resources that build confidence and create space for Indigenous knowledge and perspectives to shape school culture. Genuine reconciliation, participants agreed, depends on leaders who are willing to listen, learn, and act both at the division table and at the classroom door.

## School Level Leadership

Participants describe their roles as school-level leaders in reconciliation as both facilitators and catalysts for change grounded in daily actions, relationship building, and creating supportive conditions for others to learn and lead. They see themselves as responsible for setting a tone in their schools: as one administrator stated, “This work is extremely important. We are in a key position to impact thinking and action toward reconciliation.” Principals must act as cultural change leaders and “lead learners,” shaping the conditions, relationships, and moral purpose that make sustained improvement possible (Fullan, 2011). Another leader emphasized that modelling reconciliation by keeping it “at the forefront of PD days and staff meetings,” ensures it remains visible and prioritized. Participants consistently described how reconciliation moves beyond statements of intent when leaders make it a living, daily priority across every aspect of school life. Yet another reflected that part of their leadership is “planting those seeds for our staff to think about” and “meeting people where they’re at” while also deciding when “more pressure has to be applied because you can’t just pretend that you didn’t know anymore.”

## Integrating Reconciliation into Leadership Practices

As Sun West School Division school leaders engage reconciliation work, we wondered how participants viewed the impact of these on their leadership practices. The highest percentage of principals (about 70 per cent) reported that they have begun to take action on reconciliation in their leadership practices yet continue to seek further growth. Another survey participant observed that while this work is important, aligning this with other initiatives is a challenge. Only a small number indicated that reconciliation is not yet part of their work, and few described it as fully integral to their leadership approach. One respondent acknowledged the ongoing nature of this work, stating, “I am exploring, but I

know there's always more to learn and do." This suggests that while progress is underway, there remains significant opportunity, and appetite, for deeper professional learning and system support which is further explained in Theme 3.



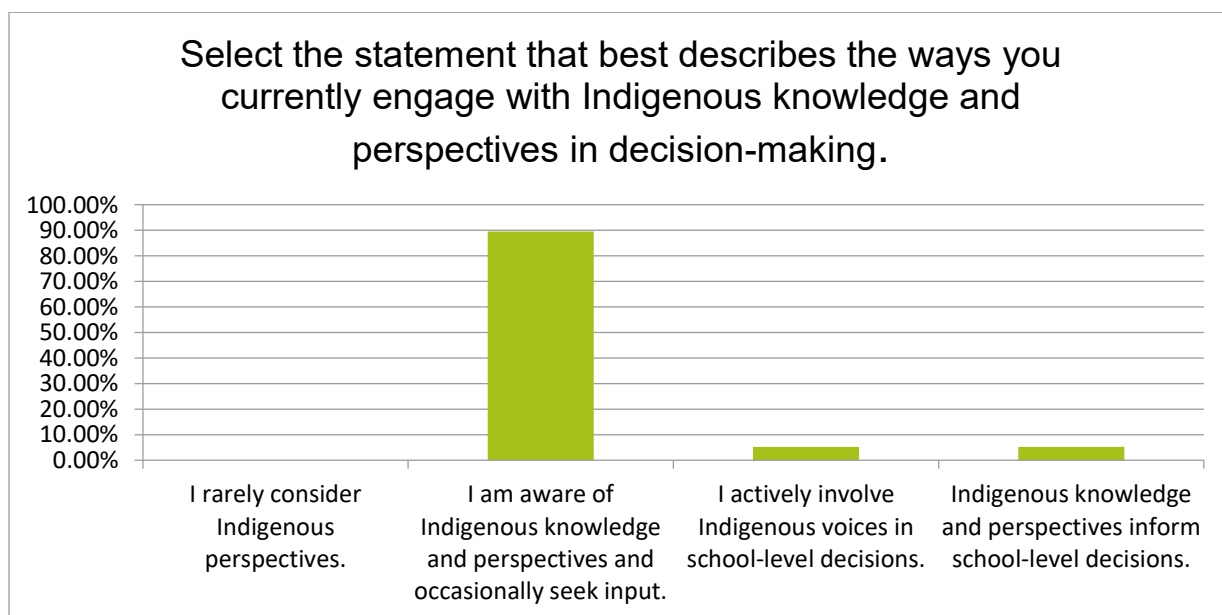
## Decision-Making

The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action* (2015) invited authentic partnership in decision-making around Indigenous education, underscoring the necessity of focused, authentic reconciliation efforts in K-12 education. Such reciprocal relationships ensure that the opinions of First Nations education organizations play a key role in determining how to improve student outcomes. By engaging Elders and Traditional Knowledge Holders in shared decision making, commitment to stronger culturally responsive education practices can develop throughout the K-12 education system (*Inspiring Success*, 2018).

When asked to reflect on their current practices in engaging with Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in decision-making, most participants reported that they are in the early stages of integration, consulting with Indigenous community members, Elders, or the division's Indigenous Perspectives Consultant when possible, and striving to include Indigenous viewpoints in school plans or policy changes. Some leaders described integrating Indigenous perspectives by seeking guidance before launching new programs or when addressing issues that impact Indigenous students and families. Others indicated that, while they are committed to learning and open to collaboration, regular, meaningful engagement remains a challenge, often due to limited relationships, capacity, or proximity to local Indigenous communities.

Smith (2018) stresses the essential role of educational leaders in disrupting the current Western-modelled educational system by making space for Indigenous knowledge in all levels of decision-making. One survey respondent observed, "We are open to moving things forward, we just need a hand in how we can do that, under the guidance of people who know more than we currently do." Concern around leading this work without guidance was stressed by a number of respondents. "I want to work WITH Indigenous

people, not plan without them and make mistakes or have anyone take offense.” Another observes that when events and activities are planned without input, many questions arise: “Are we doing this right / respectfully? Are there protocols we are interpreting incorrectly?” Overall, the data suggest that while there is strong intent and increasing awareness, truly collaborative and embedded decision-making with Indigenous Knowledge Holders is still developing, highlighting both progress and important opportunities for deeper partnership.



## Empowering Staff and Students

As discussed in Theme 1, becoming aware of the readiness of staff and community can assist administrators in leading reconciliation efforts. When asked about the overall school environment for leading reconciliation work, about half of administrators described their school culture as supportive and encouraging. In the survey, one administrator shared that “some of our parents and students have started voicing their Indigenous identities and connections. People are becoming more comfortable with this.” Nearly as many noted that, while some resistance exists, there are still promising opportunities to advance reconciliation, with one principal recognizing in the survey that they “have a team of staff ready to plunge forward with a strong action plan.” Empowering those who are ready for action, while providing education to those at a differing readiness level can allow an administrator to forge ahead in a good way. In this way, leadership emerged through empowerment and trust. Encouraging staff members who wish to put action in place and providing them with support and resources to implement was noted as one of the most effective ways for leaders to encourage change in their schools.

Even principals who voiced lack of confidence in their own readiness at times found that by encouraging staff to take their own actions, positive impacts were evident. In the focus group, one principal described supporting passionate teachers by giving them time, resources, and the freedom to lead school-wide reconciliation efforts: “That

was what I did, gave them the free reins. And they rolled with it ... there was a lot of learning that happened." This resulted in a transformation from a single Orange Shirt Day activity to a full program of grade-specific learning experiences, including Elder visits, cultural performances, and hands-on projects. These efforts not only deepened student understanding but also fostered pride, curiosity, and intergenerational dialogue. In the survey responses, another administrator connected the work in the classroom and with that of the leadership role: "As a teacher, I feel I was on my journey to help foster understanding, empathy and healing. As a new admin, I can continue this but also focus on helping fellow staff who need support."

Not all administrators shared the same experiences. One administrator reported experiencing significant barriers and/or discomfort within the school environment when leading this work. Another shared that, "within our small rural schools, building a team can be challenging if a leader feels 'alone in the passion'." This range of responses reflects both the progress and the lingering challenges faced by school leaders throughout Sun West School Division as they seek to embed reconciliation within their school communities.

## Leading Change – Core and Lived Aspect of Culture and Practice

Echoing the work of the *Inspiring Success* (2018) policy framework, which emphasizes the inclusion of Indigenous worldviews in renewed Saskatchewan curriculum, Sun West administrators agree that reconciliation must begin in the classroom. Survey participants highlight a belief in making reconciliation not just an initiative, but a core and lived aspect of educational culture and practice. As one administrator states, "... Indigenous ways of learning or knowing applies to all students. If we adopt this, everyone benefits from it. Aligning this with the needs of all students from all different backgrounds enhances everyone's education." However, maintaining a focus on reconciliation throughout the year can be challenging as one respondent noted: "It is important for sure, but as it is taught in the curriculum by each of the teachers, I find it is not something we focus on enough as a school-wide thing (other than the few days or few activities per year)."

When asked to provide specific examples of school-level opportunities provided in support of the Truth and Reconciliation *Calls to Action*, responses revealed that Sun West administrators have diverse experiences in leading reconciliation, each contributing in ways that reflect their unique contexts and comfort zones. Much of the response reflects a strong commitment to bringing cultural experiences to the students through activities such as tipi teachings, storytelling, beading, and bannock-making. Some led through cultural visibility and ceremony, sharing traditional teachings, languages, and medicines in school-wide events that sparked meaningful student engagement and community connection. One administrator reports a school-wide focus on cultural learning: "We have focused on sharing a monthly tipi teaching with our school community—students are nominated for recognition for the various traits that they display." These examples illustrate how Sun West administrators are actively translating reconciliation into lived educational practices.

## Impact of Leadership Actions

School principals in Saskatchewan play a central role in leading reconciliation by championing school-wide initiatives that advance Indigenous education, foster respectful relationships, and respond to the TRC's *Calls to Action* (Osmond-Johnson & Turner, 2020). One of the key questions guiding this research was to gather principals' perceptions of the impact of current leadership practices and/or initiatives had increasing understanding of Indigenous worldviews and the history and legacy of residential schools.

Participants acknowledged that assessing the impact of their leadership actions on understanding worldviews is challenging and often not easily quantifiable. Several referred to the absence of concrete data, with one administrator noting, "It's hard to assess the effectiveness, because there's not necessarily data." Leaders described relying on qualitative indicators to measure impact, such as noticing changes in students' comfort levels in asking questions, shifts in perspectives among staff and community members, and increases in open dialogue. As another explained, "For me, it's seeing the shift in people's perspective, in just students' response to certain things or questions that they're comfortable to ask, right, once those things start opening up. Or conversations that they're engaging in." Others highlighted the importance of community feedback—whether it's fewer complaints, calls of thanks, or seeing parents and students carry discussions home. When asked to assess the impact of their leadership actions on understanding Indigenous worldviews, survey participants generally recognized that meaningful change is happening but agreed that there is still significant room for further growth. The majority described the impact of their efforts as resulting in "some" or "moderate" increases in awareness: 60 per cent of respondents reported "some impact," indicating that while awareness has grown, more work is needed; 15 per cent noted "significant impact" in deepening appreciation and respect; and 15 per cent described "moderate impact" with tangible progress in understanding Indigenous worldviews.

When asked about the impact of their leadership actions on increasing understanding of historical policies affecting Indigenous communities in the survey, most school leaders see themselves as having made meaningful, but still developing, progress in this area. While only a small number (five per cent) feel their efforts have led to "transformative" impact, a quarter of respondents (25 per cent) report "meaningful impact," indicating increased awareness and empathy in their schools. The majority (55 per cent) identify their impact as "partial," with some advancements but ongoing gaps in understanding. A smaller group (15 per cent) feel their impact has been "limited," with minimal recognition of the historical context.

Across all examples, participants showed that reconciliation leadership is not about doing everything alone. Instead, it is centred on creating the conditions for others to lead, learn, and connect. One survey respondent indicated that the school has developed a small committee to develop and lead this work. Another shared, "I need to incorporate my team more as we discuss and go through the core values of our school community and how we can authentically align." One survey respondent reflected, "I envision strengthening my connections and relationships with people who know more than I do as well as collaborating with people who are closer to where I am on my reconciliation journey. Feeling this support and inviting more people to my community will hopefully inspire those around me." These statements reflect the fundamental nature

of reconciliation as relational and shared rather than something that principals can carry alone (Osmond-Johnson and Turner, 2020). This work requires ongoing dialogue, relationship building, and shared responsibility among educators and communities, not isolated individual initiatives led by an administrator alone. Through intentional actions and commitment to growth, school leaders in this study are helping their communities move forward on the path of reconciliation.

# Personal Growth and Understanding – Theme 3

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***“I am still learning. There’s so much I didn’t know growing up, and each time I lead or listen, I realize how much more there is to understand.”***

– Participant

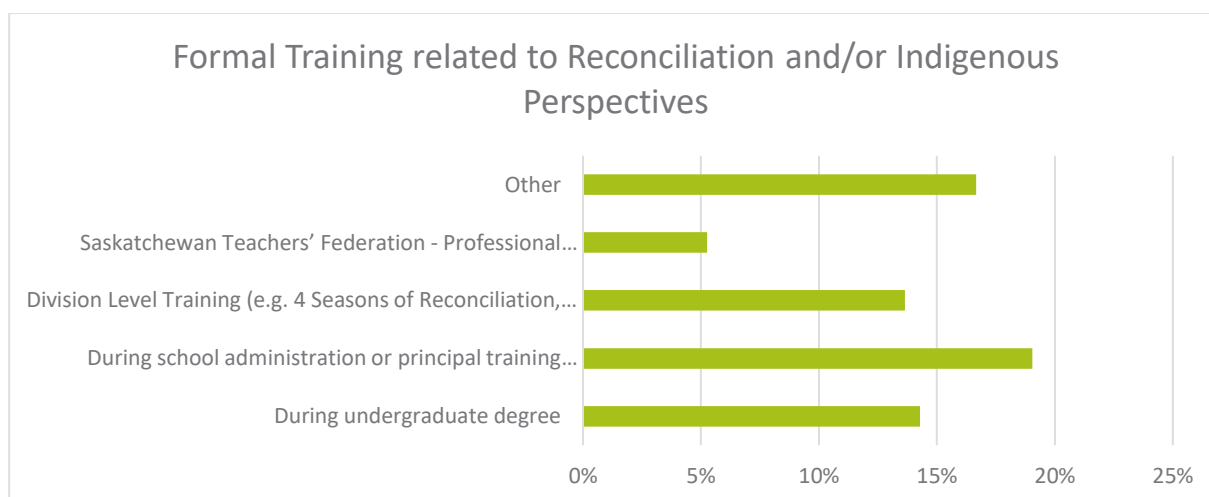


The *Calls to Action* (2015) highlight the need to identify teacher training needs, share best practices in reconciliation education, and develop age-appropriate K–12 curricula on residential schools, treaties, and the contributions of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Positioning leaders as co-learners in ongoing school-embedded professional learning communities makes the important connection between instructional leadership practices and student outcomes.

## Formal Learning Opportunities

Navigating the disruptions of reconciliation work requires school and division leaders who are committed to their own growth. As such, effective system-led professional development plays a critical role in enhancing principals’ capacity to lead effectively, including areas such as reconciliation (Robinson, et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2010). Survey participants were asked to identify formal learning opportunities around reconciliation and/or Indigenous perspectives both prior to and during their school leadership experiences. Participants indicated limited reconciliation education at the university level, with survey data revealing that less than 15 per cent of participants had received such training during their undergraduate studies. However, all survey participants received some formal learning during their time as school-based leaders through graduate studies or the Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation. A large percentage of respondents referenced Sun West-led opportunities including Leading to Learn, IgnitED Instructional Leadership workshops, and the *4 Seasons of Reconciliation* online module. More information on these initiatives can be found in Appendix B. Participants also expressed a

strong interest in pursuing further formal learning, particularly in areas such as protocol, land-based teachings, and experiential education.



## Personal Learning

Recognizing that the responsibility of advancing reconciliation work should not rest primarily on Indigenous partners or school division personnel; survey participants described various ways they have taken initiative to educate themselves about Indigenous culture and history. Leaders emphasized the value of personal learning networks, independent reading, and social media platforms in accessing Indigenous perspectives and resources. These varied approaches reflect the importance of both formal professional development and informal community insights to build confidence and guide leadership decisions in reconciliation work.

Survey responses and focus group conversations revealed notable differences in how administrators came to understand Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives. Two distinct groups emerged from the data. The first included individuals who had little exposure to Indigenous culture during childhood and began learning later in life, often through personal reading, graduate programs, or professional development opportunities outside of their formal education and work settings. The second group consisted of those who grew up outside of Sun West and developed personal relationships with Indigenous communities. One survey participant expressed the impact of this connection, sharing "[my] knowledge stems from living with Métis/Treaty people. I learned more from these experiences than any textbook, training, or workshops."

During the focus group, administrators addressed the importance of continued learning. One administrator commented, "I like to read a lot ... just kind of educating myself." Another added, "I think just doing a lot of reading – independent, self-directed reading is probably the best piece in addition to developing your personal learning network." Yet another administrator affirmed this commitment to growth, noting, "... Even with all this experience, I am still learning and have plenty to learn. It never stops." Another administrator highlighted the changes experienced when moving from the north to Sun West. "I did grow up surrounded by three First Nation reservations, and ... had lots and

lots of rich experiences on the reserve, which just don't seem that significant because they're just your life until you get down here to west central Saskatchewan where there is zero First Nation [communities] anywhere around

A common theme across both groups was the recognition that the true history of Indigenous peoples in Canada, particularly the impacts of residential schools, had been hidden or minimized in their early education. Many participants shared that they only came to fully understand these realities in adulthood, which has influenced their commitment to ongoing learning and reconciliation efforts. This new learning impacts the work, "I feel this work is important because knowledge is power. The more we learn about Indigenous perspectives, the more aware and understanding we are which influences our practices." By engaging in ongoing personal learning and approaching challenges with self-reflection and humility, principals and administrators can develop the agency needed to create real change in their schools (Fullan, 2011).

## Growing Confidence

Engaging in reconciliation in K–12 schools requires not only an understanding of its importance but also a deeply held personal commitment, paired with sufficient confidence to lead this work. When asked about comfort level in the survey, many administrators reported feeling unsure of their knowledge and skills, with one school leader explaining, "I feel sometimes I am not knowledgeable enough to share information," and another noting they were still "new to [the] role as admin, settling into the role." Another shared that while growing up immersed in Indigenous culture, "I still feel, how do I bring it forward ... without being First Nations myself, and do it respectfully?" This participant also acknowledged the support of an Elder who responded, "Just do it!" These experiences suggest a strong desire to lead reconciliation initiatives, but also a need for sustained, context-specific professional learning and mentoring to build self-efficacy in this area.

Many participants in both the survey and focus group have echoed this sentiment. Without adequate support, administrators may feel a sense of uncertainty and fear of making mistakes, which often leads to hesitation in implementing meaningful actions (Ryan, 2003). The comments reveal an understanding that while Indigenous peoples should not be expected to take on the primary work of educating non-Indigenous individuals, it remains essential that active consultation and engagement with Indigenous individuals and communities is critical (Davis, 2017). When asked to share examples of reconciliation efforts at the school level, administrators demonstrated active commitments, drawing on the strengths of their communities and their own professional commitment. They highlighted the importance of developing land acknowledgements and pairing them with meaningful actions, demonstrating a readiness to engage both staff and students. Division-supported initiatives, such as Treaty Catalyst work and student-led human rights trips, were cited as impactful opportunities that shaped future school-level planning. Consistently, they shared that the collaborative work being done has been impactful.

Many perceive their schools are still "behind" other divisions in terms of their reconciliation efforts, which heightens their motivation to seek additional learning

opportunities and cultural connections. Sometimes geographic isolation and the absence of Indigenous educators further complicate efforts to build authentic relationships and integrate Indigenous perspectives. However, even where access to formal training, cultural facilitators, or Indigenous educators is limited, leaders are intentionally using self-directed learning and informal networks to deepen their understanding and to build authentic relationships. By doing so, they are steadily increasing their confidence and capacity to implement meaningful reconciliation-focused actions in their schools.



# Relationship Building – Theme 4

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***“I think reconciliation becomes so much more powerful when it’s rooted in those relationships, and it’s not learning about the other necessarily. It’s experiencing things with people who have lived it.”***

– Participant

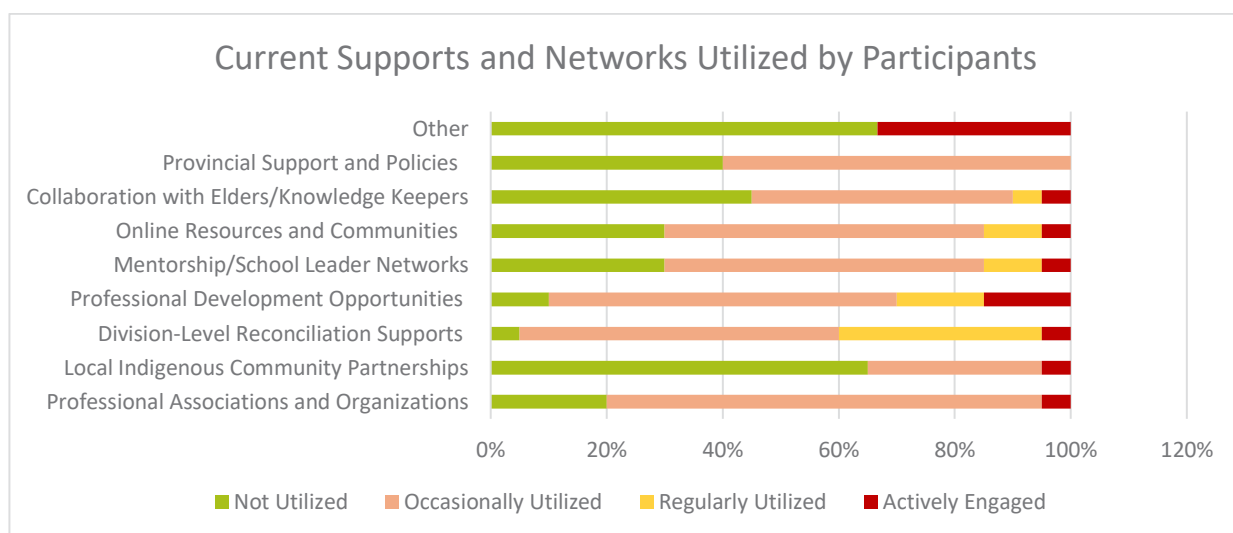


Leading reconciliation involves fostering authentic relationships with Indigenous communities and Knowledge Holders and building capacity among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff for sustained change. Participants repeatedly emphasized that reconciliation is rooted in authentic relationships with Indigenous community members, Knowledge Holders, and other educators. As one principal shared, “Reconciliation becomes powerful when it’s not just about learning about the other but experiencing it with those who have lived it.” Stories of mentorship, shared community events, and challenges in connecting with local Indigenous communities are used to illustrate this theme and its implications for rural school contexts.

Within this study, participants repeatedly emphasized that leading reconciliation requires intentional relationship-building with Indigenous communities, Knowledge Holders, and families. Participants mention inviting Elders and Knowledge Holders to school events and engaging in land-based experiences as ways of changing current practices to be more inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing. These leaders emphasized the importance of authenticity, storytelling, and creating space for First Nations and Métis students to see themselves reflected in the learning environment. Indigenous knowledge is rooted in specific places, so authentic learning must engage the land as a living context and source of teaching (Goulet and Goulet, 2014). This includes learning from Elders on the land, using local histories and practices, and reshaping teacher–student relationships around reciprocity and shared responsibility. There was also a shared desire amongst research participants to work towards the responsibility for leading reconciliation practices with students, even in the absence of special guests or external facilitators.

Leaning into relational leadership, some participants use their lived experiences and cultural knowledge to bring Indigenous perspectives into everyday classroom

conversations and activities. A principal reflected on the importance of bringing the experience of growing up in the north to Sun West School Division, sharing, “I was able to use first-hand knowledge of FNMI way of life to tell beautiful stories of the First Nations peoples I had grown up with, and to incorporate real photos of people I knew on Reconciliation walks, etc. into my social studies classes. I was able to confidently share stories and facts about FNMI issues and also about misinformation, racism, etc. due to this first-hand knowledge.” Reconciliation framed in this way includes an emphasis on valuing Indigenous knowledge, languages, and worldviews in curriculum and school culture, moving beyond superficial “tolerance” toward deep engagement with cultural differences (Ottmann, 2009, p. 4). To achieve this level of transformation, Ottmann suggests inviting students to see how knowledge looks different from Indigenous and other marginalized standpoints. Having connections with Knowledge Holders enabled some research participants to ask for advice and gain valuable perspective that they could share with their staff and school communities, but most indicated that these relationships were developed through shared experienced prior to their current leadership position within Sun West School Division.



To better understand the current supports and networks utilized by participants to develop relationships with Indigenous partners and educators, the survey provided a list of several provincial and division-level opportunities available. Approximately 65 percent of survey respondents reported that they did not draw on partnerships with local Indigenous community members or organizations to support their reconciliation efforts. More than 40 per cent of respondents shared that they had not yet collaborated with Elders or Knowledge Holders. The survey results also indicate a low percentage of participants regularly or actively engaged in connecting with existing supports outside of the division such as professional association or school leader networks.

## Barriers to Relationship Building

While multiple statements from the survey and focus group are centred on the importance of having relationships with Indigenous partners as foundational to their

confidence in leading reconciliation in their schools, leaders identified significant barriers to building such partnerships.

- **Lack of Access** – Participants frequently cited a lack of access to Indigenous community members as a key challenge in advancing this work, explaining the impact of geographical separation from First Nations communities impedes reconciliation efforts.
- **Cost** – “It’s difficult and sometimes costly to bring people in for authentic experiences for our students and difficult to access perspectives/support in planning,” one survey participant responded.
- **Lack of Diversity in Community** – Participants shared that it can be difficult in rural communities that historically have not been comprised of a diverse population.
- **Surface-Level Connections** – Another participant noted that inviting Elders and Knowledge Holders from other areas of the division was a valuable way to begin the school’s reconciliation journey but rarely provided the depth of connection that could start to bring change to the culture and decision-making processes in a school environment.
- **Lack of Opportunity** – It was noted that in some cases, division leadership personnel may have more opportunities than local school leaders to build a network of reciprocal relationships with Elders and Knowledge Holders who can work with schools; however, administrators appreciate the connections introduced to schools via division personnel. Participants voiced a need for more opportunities to connect with Indigenous individuals and communities to help educate students, staff, and the broader school community in meaningful and authentic ways.

As personal relationships with Indigenous community members and organizations continue to be developed, survey participants recognized that other avenues of support were available to them at the division and provincial level and through their personal networks. “I believe I need to continue to try to establish relationships, seek guidance and think creatively,” one principal reflected.

## Positive Impact

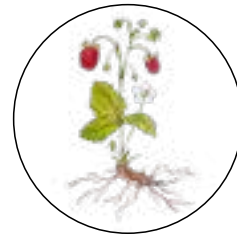
Even with these obstacles, participants shared that their reconciliation efforts were making a positive impact within their school communities. Half of the participants described how their initiatives were “building bridges” and fostering collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members. Many also emphasized the vital support provided by the division’s Indigenous Perspectives Consultant, who played a key role in helping them build relationships and develop confidence in leading reconciliation. One respondent explains, “We have reached out to Brie and will continue to seek guidance from our division for Elders/community members available to work with us.” Both focus group and survey participants stressed that strong, visible leadership paired with humility, reflection, and partnership enables meaningful progress.

# Engaging Community – Theme 5

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***“... as the leaders, we have that inherited responsibility to ensure that students, family members of the students, community members, our staff, and ourselves are informed and we’re following the mandates from the Ministry.”***

– Participant



Engaging community emerged as a central condition for reconciliation leadership in this division. A 2021 study of public attitudes in Alberta and Saskatchewan underscores why this work is complex, showing that although reconciliation is broadly supported across Canada, people in the Prairie provinces are less likely to endorse it and are more likely to hold negative views of Indigenous peoples or question whether reconciliation will improve relationships (Wotherspoon & Milne, 2021). Rural schools are deeply embedded within their communities, offering opportunities for principals to impact the wider community through reconciliation-focused initiatives. These efforts can play a vital role in fostering meaningful relationships and strengthening community ties. In rural contexts where staff live in the same communities as families and often hear local views outside of the classroom, these broader attitudes shape how reconciliation efforts are understood, received, and enacted in schools.

Despite these challenges, many principals stressed the importance of community work in rural settings. One survey participant explains, “I also think it’s important to extend this learning to parents and others in our community. I know that this will take time and that it is not always possible to change people’s perspectives but providing opportunities to learn continues to be important.” Another indicates that the school “will take the lead in change for our entire community. No action has happened in our town.” While community education around reconciliation is not a direct responsibility of principals, one survey respondent shared, “I also am able to reach the family and community members with FNMI content through newsletters and social media, as well as at SCC meetings. I model inclusion of FNMI content to my staff as a school leader at staff meetings and PD days, as well as through everyday conversation.” Another expressed the “positive feedback received by the community in regard to our tipi raising and Indigenous artists and storytellers.” By engaging community in these ways, principals

can extend their influence outside the walls of the classroom and contribute to increased understanding and empathy.

## Partnering with School Community Councils

Partnering with School Community Councils to expand the community understanding of Indigenous history and the importance of reconciliation is an action identified as helpful in advancing reconciliation understanding in the community. As mentioned earlier in this report, in Sun West School Division SCCs have an opportunity to voluntarily participate in the *4 Seasons of Reconciliation* course. One focus group participant mentioned that they were pleasantly surprised at how much interest there was by SCC members in completing the course.

Ascertaining the readiness of the community for reconciliation initiatives is mentioned as difficult to measure and must be based on experiences and perceptions. Focus group participants mentioned that readiness may be visible in the presence or lack of resistance or displeasure shown by parents and community members when actions such as Orange Shirt Day are taken. Survey participants were asked, "From your perspective, how well do you think community and school members understand the significance of the Truth and Reconciliation *Calls to Action*?" From this purely subjective data, trends of limited awareness of the community members and SCC members emerged. In contrast, participants reflected on a greater awareness of staff, students, and self. At the same time, several respondents noted that School Community Councils sometimes lack Indigenous representation, limiting opportunities for shared decision-making and for Indigenous voices to shape school priorities. A desire to invite Indigenous voices to be present and influential in school community conversations was expressed by participants.

## Broader Community Context

Focus group participants and survey respondents experienced some apprehension as school leaders advancing reconciliation efforts in their rural communities. There is a wide variation in terms of community readiness that does impact the efforts of school leaders; there must be an appetite from the leader to confidently take steps in their community, and that can understandably be a daunting task that will be different for each administrator. As "... am I OK with upsetting the community? I think ... that's another indicator, ...? ... how much discourse am I OK with? Because education is largely about creating discourse. You know, I think that being able to measure how much discourse you can tolerate without going into like burnout is important." Some administrators reported feeling prepared to "disrupt" inequitable practices and narratives, yet sensed their communities remained at an "observing" stage and expressed concern about how reconciliation-focused initiatives would be received. Not every action needs to be grand; small actions by school leaders can have significant impacts in the community. One focus member shared that, "... just by giving some basic background, it is promoting conversation between family, students, and parents. A few parents have come to me, and a few kids have come to me just saying, thanks for helping start my journey. Nothing big, but a start."

Schools in Sun West have had success with actions within their communities such as partnering with local museums, regional libraries, and inviting community members into the school to participate in school activities such as book walks that incorporate Indigenous education (e.g., book walks, Orange Shirt Day activities). Participants recognized that there is a great deal of value in having students share their learning and invite families and community members to join them. "... that's the avenue. It is definitely through the kids. The community – that's the way you're going to get them there."

# Hopes and Dreams

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***"I just want everybody to realize we are all Treaty people...for it to just be in our nature ... just there. All doing it together and getting rid of all the racism – covert, overt – all of it. That's my hopes and dreams."***

– Participant



Echoing Senator Murray Sinclair's reminder that *"education is what got us into this situation, and education is what will get us out,"* participants in this action research project articulated a powerful and hopeful vision: reconciliation must live at the heart of what schools do every day. They see education not simply as a system, but as a relational space with the potential to transform communities, restore trust, and build a more just future for all children. Three interconnected dreams emerged: these dreams that outline *why* this work matters and *why* we must continue.

## Inclusion Is Lived, Not Declared

Administrators imagined reconciliation as a catalyst for deeply inclusive schools, places where every learner feels seen, valued, and represented. As one Saskatchewan administrator reflected, "Reconciliation is not a lesson for one day. It's the daily work of relationship, honesty, and hope." The call is to build leaders' confidence and capacity so that reconciliation becomes embedded within their identity as allies, walking alongside Indigenous community members while listening, learning, and acting with integrity. When inclusion becomes lived practice rather than aspiration, schools become powerful agents of societal change.

## Rooted in Authentic Relationships and Shared Experience

Participants emphasized that reconciliation must grow from authentic, reciprocal relationships. They expressed a longing for more opportunities to connect with Indigenous partners, to deepen understanding through lived experience, and to welcome greater diversity within the teaching profession, particularly in rural areas where these relationships can have profound impact. They voiced a desire for more opportunities to connect with Indigenous partners and for welcoming greater diversity in

our teaching. Strengthening relationships with Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Holders, families, and local Nations brings richness and relevance to learning that cannot be achieved through curriculum alone. When these relationships are reciprocal, both communities and schools grow. This reciprocity is not transactional; it is relational. It honours the principle that each partner has gifts to share and responsibilities to uphold.

## Community Learning Leads to Community Transformation

***“We can and will make a difference, one child, one teacher, one parent at a time.”***

– Participant

Administrators described reconciliation as a movement that extends beyond classrooms and into homes, families, and entire communities. They shared stories of parents engaging in conversations sparked by their children’s learning and of communities beginning new journeys of understanding. They envisioned reconciliation as “an opportunity to make positive change within our community and with future generations, to make sure that it’s more inclusive for everybody.” In this vision, schools become catalysts for intergenerational transformation.

Together, participants articulated a shared vision of reconciliation as a living, relational commitment—one rooted in inclusion, reciprocity, and the recognition of Indigenous partners as equal and essential voices in shaping the future of education. Their hopes and dreams point to a compelling why: because schools have the power to model the relationships our communities aspire to; because authentic partnership requires us to listen deeply, give generously, and walk alongside Indigenous Nations with humility and integrity; and because transformative change happens when we honour the gifts, knowledge, and leadership that each partner brings. This collective vision positions reconciliation not as an initiative, but as a shared journey—a daily practice that nurtures belonging, strengthens communities, and builds a future in which every learner, every family, and every Nation thrives.

# Part Three – Next Steps – Research Recommendations

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Rural administrators in this study described how they are leading reconciliation in their schools, how this work is shaping understandings of Indigenous worldviews and residential school history, and how relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are being strengthened. They also identified challenges, opportunities, and what they see as necessary to move reconciliation forward in meaningful, sustainable ways.

Their insights point to seven key recommendations for supporting reconciliation leadership in rural school divisions.

1. Build leader confidence and capacity:
  - Strengthen knowledge, training, and practice so leaders feel confident initiating and guiding reconciliation work.
  - Support movement from “supporter and advocate” toward instructional and cultural leadership.
  - Normalize learning as a process that involves trying, making mistakes, and seeking support.
2. Deep, ongoing professional learning:
  - Provide continued learning for administrators, teachers, staff, and families on Indigenous histories, perspectives, protocols, and worldviews.
  - Emphasize co-learning with Indigenous partners to design relational, community rooted experiences.
  - Encourage educators to pursue FNMI learning beyond division provided opportunities.

3. Authentic integration of Indigenous perspectives:
  - Shift from “add on” projects to embedded inclusion across curriculum and school life.
  - Guard against “othering” by weaving Indigenous perspectives throughout learning, not isolating them.
  - Support leaders and staff to integrate this work even amid competing initiatives.
4. Protocols, practices, and land acknowledgements:
  - Build confidence in leading practices such as smudging and land acknowledgements with respect and accuracy.
  - Continue developing school-specific land acknowledgements rooted in local context.
  - Provide guidance on protocols, reduce fear of “getting it wrong,” and embed expectations into consistent practice.
5. Strong relationships with Indigenous partners:
  - Sustain partnerships with Elders, Knowledge Holders, and Indigenous advisors for planning, decision-making, and events.
  - Increase local connections, including Indigenous representation on School Community Councils.
  - Honour reciprocity so relationships involve shared giving, learning, and leadership.
6. Community engagement and land-based learning:
  - Create opportunities for students, staff, and families to learn from First Nations leaders and land-based teachings.
  - Deepen connections to land as both context and teacher in reconciliation work.
7. Resources to support reconciliation leadership:
  - Allocate dedicated personnel to support school based reconciliation efforts so responsibility is shared, not downloaded onto individuals.
  - Align policies, procedures, and funding at the system level to reinforce and sustain reconciliation initiatives over time.

The research team identified additional directions for consideration:

- Indigenous Education Advocacy Group: Establish a group with school and community representation—Indigenous and non Indigenous—to review key policies through anti racist and decolonizing lenses.
- Leadership development: Maintain a strong focus on cultural awareness, Indigenous ways of knowing, anti-racist education, and decolonizing practices in leadership learning.
- Treaty education: Deepen understanding of historical and contemporary issues impacting Indigenous learners and strengthen knowledge of treaty responsibilities.

- Analyze achievement gaps: Examine achievement data through a decolonizing lens to surface structural barriers and respond to diverse student needs.
- Language and culture revitalization: Continue supporting school programming that upholds and revitalizes Indigenous languages and cultures.

Taken together, these insights offer a clear, actionable pathway toward more meaningful, sustained reconciliation in schools, aligning closely with national and provincial priorities such as the CMEC Indigenous Education Plan, *Inspiring Success*, and the Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework. By acting on these recommendations, school leaders can help ensure that reconciliation becomes a lived practice—evident in relationships, learning environments, and outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students—rather than a short-term initiative.

## With Gratitude

This research journey has been shaped and strengthened by the generosity, courage, and wisdom of many people. We offer our deepest gratitude to all who walked alongside us, believed in this work, and helped raise awareness of what meaningful reconciliation can look like in schools and communities.

- We are profoundly grateful to the Indigenous educators and community partners who offered guidance, teachings, and support. Your patience, your stories, and your trust grounded this work in relationship and responsibility. We honour the time you gifted us and the knowledge you shared.
- We extend heartfelt thanks to the administrators who shared their experiences with honesty, vulnerability, and hope. Your willingness to reflect, question, and imagine new possibilities made this study possible. Your voices and leadership continue to inspire pathways for change.
- To teachers, support staff, families, and students who engage daily in the work of learning, unlearning, and relationship building: thank you. Your commitment to creating schools where every learner feels seen and valued reflects the heart of reconciliation.
- We also acknowledge the support of division leaders, board trustees, and colleagues who encouraged this research and created space for dialogue and action. Your belief in the importance of this work allowed it to grow.
- We offer our sincere appreciation to the McDowell Foundation for their generous funding and belief in the value of practitioner-led research. Their support not only made this study possible but also reaffirmed the importance of inquiry, innovation, and educator voice in advancing reconciliation across Saskatchewan schools. Through their commitment, the McDowell Foundation continues to open doors for conversations that matter and supports projects that strengthen teaching, learning, and community relationships.
- Finally, we offer gratitude to all those—named and unnamed—who continue to advocate for truth, justice, and equitable learning environments across our province and beyond. This work is sustained by many hands and many hearts.

Thank you for walking with us, teaching us, challenging us, and believing in the potential of reconciliation in education.

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# Appendix A: Sun West School Division Context for Reconciliation Work

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Sun West School Division's reconciliation efforts are grounded in provincial and national commitments while reflecting local priorities. This appendix provides an overview of the policies, plans, leadership practices, and actions that reflect the commitment to Truth and Reconciliation.

## Division Policy Framework

Reconciliation in Sun West School Division is guided by Board Policy 19: Indigenous Education (2024). This policy aims identifies five key commitment areas:

- building relationships and partnerships,
- creating welcoming environments,
- representative governance and workforce,
- increasing capacity throughout the division,
- affirming and revitalizing Indigenous languages and cultures.

## Sun West School Division – Indigenous Education Plan (2021–2027)

Sun West's Indigenous Education Plan is centred on a commitment to engage all school community members in their personalized growth in knowledge and experience of Indigenous Perspectives by honouring and answering the Truth and Reconciliation Education *Calls to Action*. Four overarching goals guide this work:

1. Infusion of Indigenous perspectives throughout K-12 curriculum.
2. Support staff growth and understanding of authentic Indigenous perspectives.
3. Build confidence in all Sun West students and staff related to Truth and Reconciliation.
4. Actualize the goals of *Inspiring Success: Pre-K First Nations and Métis Education Framework*.

Actions within the IEP specifically reference and support each of the three Priority areas of the Education Plan. Though many actions have been implemented, broad highlights of the plan include:

- employment of a full-time Indigenous Perspectives Consultant who supports each of the schools in the division, providing learning opportunities in classrooms and for staff and School Community Council members,
- professional development for all SWSD staff using the *4 Seasons of Reconciliation* and the opportunity for all School Community Council members to enrol in the modules for community development,
- treaty catalyst teachers for each school are provided additional professional development to implement in schools in a “train the trainer” model,
- developing a network of partnerships across the province.

Several key commitments are actualized through various partnerships and division-level initiatives. The following chart provides an overview of these actions as they align with SWSD Board Policy 19:

|                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Building Relationships and Partnerships</b> | <b>Involvement with Provincial Committees</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indigenous Education Operational Group (IEOG) via the SSBA</li> <li>• FNMI Leads Network (Saskatchewan Teachers’ Federation)</li> </ul><br><b>Relationship and Partnership Development</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Land-Based Cultural Camps at Makwa Sahgaiehcan at Loon Lake (funded by RBC grant).</li> <li>• Kindersley/D’Arcy/Fiske Métis Local; Biggar Local.</li> <li>• Beady’s &amp; Okemasis.</li> <li>• Red Pheasant.</li> </ul><br><b>Divisionally Coordinated School Events</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mahikanak Dance Troupe</li> <li>• SWSD Land-Based Learning Grant</li> </ul> |
|------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|

|                                                              |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Creating Welcoming Environments                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kevin Peeace mural project at Harris-Tessier School (funded by Sask Arts Artists in Schools grant).</li> <li>• Cree Calendar posted in school libraries.</li> <li>• Teaching smudging.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
| Representative Governance and Workforce                      | <p><b>Indigenous Perspectives Consultant Position</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1.0 FTE position.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| Increasing Capacity                                          | <p><b>Division Level Professional Development Opportunities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leading to Learn Leadership Training (division and school Level leadership).</li> <li>• School Based Administrator Ignited Leadership Training.</li> <li>• Treaty Catalyst Teacher Role (professional development)</li> <li>• <i>4 Seasons of Reconciliation</i> Online Module (required for all staff, optional for SCC).</li> </ul> <p><b>External Conferences and Workshops</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First Nations Language Keepers Gathering.</li> <li>• Think Indigenous conference.</li> </ul>                                                         |
| Affirming and Revitalizing Indigenous Languages and Cultures | <p><b>School Based/Classroom Workshops Beading</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cort Dogniez–presentations.</li> <li>• Barry Shingoose–Star Lodge Teachings.</li> <li>• Tipi Raising–Lyndon Linklater.</li> <li>• Collaborative Mural–Kevin Peeace.</li> <li>• Sky Boyz Drum Troupe &amp; Dancers–St. Francis.</li> <li>• Teachings from the Birch Tree–Liz Zdunich.</li> </ul> <p><b>Resource sharing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Division Kits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Roots Literacy Kit</li> <li>• Bison Kit</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Stepping Forward with Reconciliation School Walk.</li> <li>• Various external resources.</li> </ul> |

## School-Level Improvement Plans

Each year, school principals lead staff and SCC in developing School-Level Improvement Plans that align with division priorities. Schools have the option to include Indigenous Education as a priority action or embed commitments to reconciliation within the Engagement, Achievement, and/or Well-Being Actions.

All Sun West Schools are required to develop a land acknowledgement that is created in collaboration with staff and students.

## Leadership Guidance

The *Sun West School Division Administrator Handbook* provides additional guidance, referencing reconciliation work in the areas of professional responsibility. Specifically, the Positive Climate and Culture section of the handbook invites principals to reflect on their role in leading and supporting the work of Truth and Reconciliation. By considering ways in reconciliation is/is not embedded in leadership practices and/or school-level practices (e.g. Code of Conduct, visible in classrooms, etc.), administrators may set personal or school-level goals in this area. Superintendents and school-based administrators discuss these goals at the beginning and end of the school year.

# Appendix B: Professional Development

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Professional learning has played a central role in supporting Sun West school leaders to deepen their understanding of reconciliation and to strengthen their capacity to lead this work in their schools. The following initiatives illustrate how the division has invested in ongoing leadership development aligned with provincial and divisional Indigenous education priorities.

- **Leading to Learn** – The provincially developed Leading to Learn initiative aimed to enhance the leadership skills of school principals and administrators, enabling them to create supportive and effective learning environments for Indigenous students.
- **IgnitED Instructional Leadership Workshops** – SWSD school-based administrators meet monthly as a group and incorporate professional development into each meeting to build capacity as leaders. These workshops are a key component of the division's long-range plan for supporting leaders with issues connected to the Indigenous Education Plan. Indigenous education and leading reconciliation in schools is a session topic at least once in each school year and most recently, the group redeveloped their norms utilizing Dr. Martin Brokenleg's Circle of Courage as part of a commitment to infusing Indigenous perspectives into daily practice.
- **4 Seasons of Reconciliation** – All administrators and Sun West staff are required to complete the *4 Seasons of Reconciliation* modules offered through reconciliation education which provide foundational training in the historical and contemporary dimensions of reconciliation.

# Appendix C:

## Key Understandings Comparison

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This study was guided by a central question: *How are rural K-12 administrators in one Saskatchewan school division experiencing and leading reconciliation within their schools?*

The four research overarching questions focused on strategies and actions principals have implemented in response to the *Calls to Action* and the impact of these on:

- Deepening the understanding of Indigenous worldviews and the history and legacy of residential schools
- Strengthening relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people within the school division.

To situate the responses from this study within the broader provincial understanding of reconciliation in education, this chart provides a comparison of four key understandings presented in the *Inspiring Success Framework* (2018) from the Ministry of Education and the Indigenous Education Responsibility Framework developed by the Saskatchewan School Boards Association.

Direct alignments are highlighted in red.

| Reconciliation in Education Includes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Inspiring Success* | IERF        | SWSD Research Data |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------------|
| Closing Achievement Gaps                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | ✓                  | ✓           |                    |
| <b>Culturally Appropriate Curriculum</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevant instruction and assessment</li> <li>• Value and importance of teaching Métis and FN history, cultures, ways of knowing</li> <li>• Language revitalization is supported.</li> </ul> | ✓<br>✓<br>✓        | ✓<br>✓<br>✓ | ✓                  |
| <b>Partnerships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connecting for decision making</li> <li>• Connecting for cultural understanding</li> </ul>                                                                                                                       | ✓<br>✓             | ✓<br>✓      | ✓                  |
| <b>Addressing Institutional Barriers and Racism in Schools</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Examining power and privilege</li> <li>• Representational hiring practices</li> </ul>                                                                                 | ✓<br>✓             | ✓           | ✓                  |

\* *Inspiring Success* connects directly to the TRC *Calls to Action*.







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ISBN #978-1-927107-70-6 (print)  
#978-1-927107-71-3 (online)