

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Leading Reconciliation in Rural Schools: McDowell Research Grant

Jade Ballek, Donna Locke, Stacy Becker, Kim Fick, Angela Sparks, Brie Phillips

Project #333



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Research Coordinator

Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation

2317 Arlington Avenue

Saskatoon SK S7J 2H8

Telephone: 1-800-667-7762 or 306-373-1660

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Introduction

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.

For more information on research methodologies, please see the full report here:



<https://mcdowellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/Leading-Reconciliation.pdf>



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 (Ostando, 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.

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Emerging Themes

Theme 1 – The Importance of Reconciliation in K-12

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).

Theme 2 – Leadership as a Driver for Change

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.

Theme 3 – Personal Growth and Understanding

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.

Theme 4 – Relationship Building

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.

Students, families, and educators benefit when schools commit to developing meaningful relationships as a pathway forward to deeper understanding.

Theme 5 – Engaging Community

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).

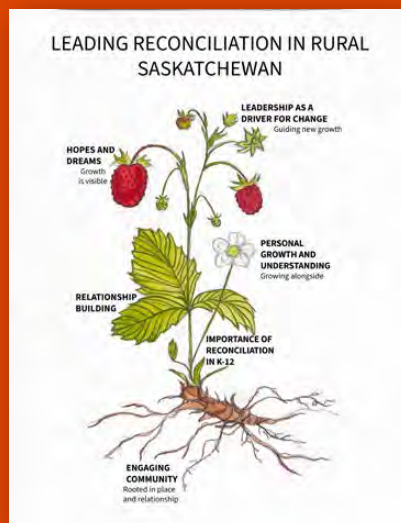
Despite these challenges, many principals stressed the importance of community work in rural settings. While community education around reconciliation is not a direct responsibility of principals, one survey respondent shared that they are able to model FNMI content through newsletters and social media, as well as SCC meetings.

Part Three – Next Steps – Research Recommendations

- 1 Build leader confidence and capacity.
- 2 Deep, ongoing professional learning.
- 3 Authentic integration of Indigenous perspectives.
- 4 Protocols, practices, and land acknowledgements.
- 5 Strong relationships with Indigenous partners, including Elders, Knowledge Holders, and Indigenous advisors.
- 6 Community engagement and land-based learning.
- 7 Resources to support reconciliation leadership.

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.
- **Analyzing 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.



See the complete report here. ↩



<https://mcdowellfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/09/Leading-Reconciliation.pdf>



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