

**SURROUNDED BY CEDAR:
IMPROVING THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES
OF OUR
INDIGENOUS CHILDREN LIVING IN THE
BC FOSTER CARE SYSTEM**

COMMUNITY DIRECTIONS REPORT # 1

WRITTEN BY

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SURROUNDED BY CEDAR CHILD AND FAMILY SERVICES

AND DEVELOPED IN COLLABORATION WITH

OUR ELDERS, STAFF AND COUNCIL MEMBERS, FORMER YOUTH IN CARE,
COMMUNITY MEMBERS, FOSTER PARENTS, EDUCATORS,
GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES,
OFFICE FOR THE REPRESENTATIVE OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH,
INDIGENOUS AND NON INDIGENOUS AGENCY PARTNERS

VICTORIA, BC, CANADA

JANUARY 2008

INTRODUCTION

The first goal of the BC provincial government's 2005 Throne Speech is to "make BC the best-educated, most literate place in North America." The dismal educational outcomes of BC's most public children, our Indigenous children living in the BC child welfare system, indicate that collective responsibilities and strategic actions must be taken to ensure their success in an increasingly technological and educated society. Perhaps more than any other factor, educational success is the most significant predictor of their future life outcomes, including career, job prospects and poverty levels that will affect them, their children and grandchildren. We cannot expect better educational outcomes and life long learning for our children in the absence of educational coordination across government Ministries, additional funding, strategic support, culturally sensitive education and training. This report represents collective community wisdom and recommendations to improve the educational outcomes of Indigenous children living in the BC foster care system in Victoria BC.

BACKGROUND

Surrounded By Cedar Child and Family Services (SCCFS) is a community based delegated agency with Indigenous principles that direct us to present issues of concern to our community, ask for guidance, direction and implement an action plan. In 2008, SCCFS will become the legal guardian of fifty (50) Indigenous children and youth currently cared for by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) in Victoria. File reviews and discussions with the children's current caregivers and legal guardians indicate that our children struggle academically in school and present with significant health, placement, stability and Indigenous identity challenges. A 2007 report by the Representative for Children and Youth indicates that less than two per cent (2%) of our children living in foster care can expect to graduate from an academic high school program within six years of entering grade eight. These educational outcomes are not acceptable for the Indigenous children to whom SCCFS will become legal guardians and our community members.

PURPOSE OF THE COMMUNITY FORUM

In November 2007 SCCFS invited a range of community members to share information and work together to improve our children's educational outcomes. Invitations to participate in the community forum were mailed and emailed to Indigenous community members, local and provincial Indigenous and non Indigenous organizations, educators in school districts, colleges and universities, youth, family members and foster parents, representatives of the BC Ministries of Children and Family Development, Education and Attorney General, community Foundations, Victoria and Vancouver based agency councils.

COMMUNITY FORUM PROCESS

Over sixty-five (65) community members attended the December 18, 2007 forum to meet one another, share a meal and listen to presentations from representatives of the Victoria and Sooke School Districts (Aboriginal Services), SCCFS, and the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth. In addition, written submissions from the Child and Family Counselling Association (Victoria) and Nil/Tu'O Child and Family Services were provided to all community participants.

Following the presentations, the community members were divided into six groups and asked two questions:

- What can you contribute from your own professional or personal position to improve the educational outcomes of our Aboriginal children in foster care? Who else can help?
- What are strategies that can support or improve the educational outcomes of our Aboriginal children in foster care?

Individual SCCFS staff members Shelly Johnson, Lisa George, Sabrina Williams, Yasmin Ali, Maria Sampare and Karen Ahenakew were assigned to record each group response and report back to the larger group. Following the community forum, the six group submissions were organized and prepared in this report by Shelly Johnson, CEO SCCFS.

RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM THE COMMUNITY FORUM

TO ALL PARTICIPANTS:

1. Everyone needs to help mitigate poverty and incarceration as predictable outcomes for Indigenous children leaving the BC child welfare system. We cannot abandon Indigenous youth simply because they have reached the age of majority in B.C.
2. The B.C. Ministries of Children and Family Development, Education, Health, Attorney General and others must work together in the development of public policies and practice to support BC's most public special needs children; those in the care of the BC Foster Care system, incarcerated in juvenile justice systems, Children in the Home of a Relative, and those living under Supervision Orders.
3. Work towards ensuring that every Indigenous child in care has a relationship with at least one individual that will be consistent and love them throughout their childhood, youth and adulthood.
4. Work toward stability in foster care placements, schools and connection or re-connection to safe biological or extended family members.
5. Introduce Indigenous children in care to healthy Indigenous role models (journalists, fisheries and forestry workers, judges, carpenters, lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, professors, plumbers, electricians, tourism, writers, accountants etc). Help them visualize different career, vocational, apprenticeship, work and post secondary educational options.

TO GOVERNMENT

6. Government must include the *right to education* as one of the Rights of Children in Care (Section 70, *BC Child, Family and Community Services Act*).
7. Government must work to remove impediments and barriers to ensure that educational services are child and family centred rather than systems centred.
8. Government must provide culturally specific funding to support alternative educational programs for Indigenous children in care.

9. Government must provide global funding for tutors to liaise between the school and Indigenous child's home or foster home.
10. Government must provide structured tutoring support for every child in care and ensure at least one hour per day (or more) of paid tutoring support to be based on the child's identified IEP needs. Tutoring support must be implemented "where the children are" whether that is in the home, schools after hours, community recreational centers or neighborhood houses.
11. Government must begin to collect statistics of former youth in care to better understand the numbers that are returning to school and/or completing courses later in life (beyond the six years following entry of grade eight).
12. Government must provide adequate Post Majority Service funds and increase scholarship opportunities for Indigenous children in care. Funding must include a living allowance for a minimum 12 months post majority and educational support to age 24.
13. Government must fund a Youth Transition Conferencing Project in Victoria similar to the Vancouver based project. Youth in care must be supported to set and attain educational, vocational and apprenticeship goals.
14. Government must fund transportation costs required to support educational and/or tutoring opportunities for children in care.
15. Government must adequately fund opportunities for Indigenous children in care to participate in sports, traditional cultural awareness education and training, as well as reconnecting with elders and other Indigenous people.
16. Government must fund more culturally sensitive parenting programs for Indigenous parents who were historically placed in the BC child welfare system and make these parenting programs available to youth currently in the BC child welfare system.

TO EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

17. Educational institutions must acknowledge that Indigenous children in care experience the most extensive attacks on their identity and racism within schools. Educators must understand the importance of Indigenous curriculum, teachers and support workers within the schools in helping Indigenous students to feel that they "belong" in the schools.
18. Educator training programs must help student teachers to understand that one of the primary tools used to break down Aboriginal social institutions is the present day educational system and previous residential school systems.
19. Educators must understand that Indigenous parents and grandparents continue to have fears of educational institutions based in historical residential school issues and because Indigenous students are sometime "apprehended" or "removed" from their families in schools.

20. Culturally sensitive curriculum needs to be developed outside a colonial perspective. Curriculum developers must understand that one culture cannot teach all ideas and practices to children from other culture. Curriculum developers and teachers need to be trained by Indigenous Elders and work together to teach about the history of residential schools in BC.
21. Educators must understand that public schools model middle class, mainstream values - not Aboriginal values. They must work to make schools more welcoming to Indigenous parents and students, i.e. parent lounges, encouraging pride in the children's individual and collective Nations.
22. Educators must meet with students (children in care) by the end of October every year to establish an Individual Education Plan that includes the child, safe biological family members, community professionals and foster parents.
23. Educators must provide FASD and special education information and resources to other educators, social workers, foster parents, children and parents.
24. Educators need to be aware that although transitions between schools and the number of teachers between education levels (elementary – middle – high) may be meant to foster independence in Indigenous children, this does not always work for students who are not ready for that level of independence.
25. Educators should provide extra school credit to Indigenous students who attend cultural activities. This option could be managed through Big House season (on Vancouver Island if the child or youth is from a nation and family that practices Big House traditions) or through an Individual Directed Study course in collaboration with the child, their guardian and nation.
26. Post secondary educators should offer students additional credit for mentoring or tutoring Indigenous students in care, and support them to become assessed and matched with appropriate students.
27. Culturally sensitive daycare and pre-school experiential learning opportunities should be funded and available to every Indigenous child in care under the age of five.

TO CHILD WELFARE INSTITUTIONS

28. Implement a Youth in Care Network in Victoria and encourage Youth to help themselves. Ask the youth, "In what way can I help you?" Then, listen and act on their feedback.
29. Develop a plan to integrate Elders into programs for Youth. Implement ways to support shared learning projects in which Youth "adopting" an Elder or an Elder to "adopt" a Youth.
30. Child welfare institutions must meet with the child, school, foster home, and the family when the child is moving to a new school to ensure an educational plan is in place for the child.

31. Child welfare institutions must help foster parents and teachers be sensitive to the traumatic effects of foster care placement, school and educational programs changes on children in care. Child welfare institutions must encourage and assist foster parents to make education a priority for Indigenous children in care and to advocate for the child's educational needs.
32. Child welfare institutions must advocate for specific literacy funds for Indigenous children in their care.
33. Child welfare institutions must continue to advocate for the development of positive working relationships and provide community based opportunities for dialogue between government representatives, service providers, family, youth and community members who are interested in issues affecting Indigenous youth in care.
34. Child welfare institutions must have full time reconnection workers (ROOTS workers) to connect Indigenous communities with their Indigenous children living in foster care. SCCFS must work to involve Indigenous communities in the children's lives in meaningful ways. Transportation and support costs must be included to meet these reconnections.
35. Child welfare institutions should work with Hulitan Social Services to find funding and develop a program like *Journeys of the Heart* (cultural early learning programs and preschools) to be inclusive of school age children in care.
36. Child welfare institutions should work with service delivery contractors to place more emphasis on educational and health needs of children in care than are currently identified.

TO HEALTH

37. Children in care must have ready access to information in schools and community regarding specific health and wellness issues such as suicide, youth mental and sexual health, pregnancy planning, addictions, medical, physical, traumatic and emotional needs. Indigenous health care practitioners should be available to work with Indigenous children in care as required.
38. Mental health education programs must be developed in collaboration with Indigenous peoples to help educators, social workers, and youth understand how colonialism manifests among Indigenous people through risk-taking behaviors, alcohol and drug addictions, gambling addictions and prescription drug misuse.
39. Foster parents, educators and social workers need specific training, plain language resources and support to understand and manage the numerous special education and health needs of Indigenous children in care.
40. Culturally sensitive resources and psycho-social-educational assessments must happen in a timely way to help foster parents and others better understand how the special needs of Indigenous children in care impact the student's ability to learn, and how to better meet their learning needs in that capacity.

TO COMMUNITY

41. Encourage Big Brothers and Big Sisters to begin a program specifically for Indigenous children in care. School is only a part of the solution; youth need to feel connected to and be a part of the community. They need support to become connected, and consistency in a Big Brother or Sister mentor. This requires a staff member assigned to screen and match volunteer applicants (students, retirees) with children in care.
42. Develop fundraising options and business partnerships for programs specifically to assist children in care. Develop “sponsor a child” programs to buy tools, i.e. lap top computers, for children in care that require additional supports to increase their grades.
43. Bus passes must be provided to all Indigenous children in care that require them. Bus passes assist children to be punctual, attend school, and to participate in extra-curricular school and recreational activities.
44. Develop a mentoring program through Big Brothers and Sisters or other agencies to support Indigenous children in care. No one school, agency or Ministry system can implement these changes alone. Each agency requires support from the entire community.
45. Work with Foundations and funding bodies to help children stay in school. Communicate the educational realities of children in care and provide information to 160 community Foundations across Canada. Ask them to identify children in care, children living with relatives and those living under supervision orders as a specific special needs group. Publicly identify the children’s challenges using their “Vital Signs” community report card.
46. Work with businesses and other agencies to develop apprenticeships and life skills programs for Indigenous children in care.
47. Traditional education in the form of “rights of passage” ceremonies and lessons from our natural environments (from the perspective of the youth’s respective Nations) should be implemented for Indigenous youth in care. Children in care should be educated as to the importance of these ceremonies and supported to attend them for educational credits, if they so desire.
48. Identify Indigenous cultural resource people in the urban community for Indigenous children living in the city.
49. Minimize risk to children in care as much as possible. Educate children about responsible behavior, self respect and healthy boundary setting.
50. Foster parents and community members must be advocates for realistic educational expectations, timely and accurate health and educational diagnosis, earlier intervention and support for Indigenous children.
51. Foster parents must attend school IEP meetings and communicate with the teachers of each child in their care.

COMMUNITY DIRECTIONS REPORT – ACTION PLAN

SCCFS intends to take five actions with respect to this Community Directions Report:

1. Provide a copy of the report to all Forum participants, local and provincial government representatives, Indigenous and Non Indigenous organizations and interested stakeholders. Post the report on www.surroundedbycedar.com. Ask all recipients to share the report widely with their colleagues and interested stakeholders.
2. Advocate for adequate resources to implement the recommendations of the Community Directions report.
3. Identify a research team to produce a cost benefit analysis report indicating projected financial outcomes for the children, their families and society as to whether the recommendations are implemented or not.
4. Within five months of the transfer of child service files to SCCFS, support each of the fifty (50) Indigenous youth to speak with an advocate from the Office of the Representative for Children and Youth about educational matters affecting them.
5. In June 2008, convene a second meeting of interested community members and government partners to review the report, identify progress and barriers to implementation of the recommendations by each of the identified groups receiving the Community Directions Report.