

# Leading with Heart and History: Reflections of a First Year Principal

*Supporting Indigenous Student Success Through  
Relational and Responsive School Leadership*

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# Let us honour the land ...


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We are present today on Treaty 6 Territory and in the Homeland of the Métis Nation: this land has always been home to First Nations and Métis communities who continue to live, lead, and learn with the land.



# Today's Learning Outcomes:

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<b>Reflect on Identity and Leadership</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• positionality and vision</li></ul>
<b>Understand the Weight of History</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• commit to learning (unlearning)</li></ul>
<b>Reimagine Educational Success</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• community led, student centered</li></ul>
<b>Embrace Leadership as Relational and Disruption</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Committed to action</li></ul>



# Rooted Leadership: Michif Identity, Responsibility, and Faith

- Our identities shape, inform our leadership
- Catholic/Spiritual Metis worldview and committed to inherent and treaty responsibilities and Indigenous Control over Indigenous Education. How can I as a leader support our rights to see justice for our communities? What are my roles as a leader to create the foundations of academic and healing spaces for youth?
- Principal of Oskāyak High School formally known as Saskatoon's "Native Survival School and Joe Duquette High School" our school is a sacred space in the City of Saskatoon for Indigenous academic success and personal healing of mind, body, emotion, spirit.
- Catholic Social Teaching calls us to uphold the dignity of every person, but dignity cannot exist where racism thrives. As leaders, we must confront the structures of whiteness that oppress, exclude, and silence. Justice demands not neutrality, but the work of dismantling systems that deny the image of Creator in others. This is disrupting the status quo.
- As bell hooks (2000) writes, "Love is an action, never simply a feeling," and leadership rooted in identity must be practiced through loving action(s).





# Michif Leadership

## Indigenous Control of Education



Jean Cuthand, M. F. Norris and James Brady at demonstration in Regina, Saskatchewan, ca. 1961

### Relational Role Between Nations

Michif people hold a unique position, bridging histories of resistance and resurgence, navigating both Indigenous and colonial systems.

### Education as Rematriation

Supporting Indigenous-led education is a loving, political, and cultural act, rooted in land, language, and sovereignty.

### Solidarity Without Erasure

Standing with Cree, Dene, Saulteaux, Dakota, and Inuit education strengthens all our Nations, it affirms, not diminishes, my Michif identity.

### Leadership as Presence & Persistence

Inspired by teachings like Kokum MaryLee's, Michif leadership is an active expression of justice, rooted in identity and community.



# Relational Pedagogy & Anti-Racism

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- Spent the last 20 years as a learner, gathering my bundle, figuring out how and where I fit, not taking up space that isn't mine to take (positionality), observing, listening. Now, it's my turn to lead.
  - Verna St. Denis (2007) reminds us that anti-racism in education is inseparable from decolonization, it must confront the systems that maintain white dominance in schools.
  - Anti-racism as ongoing practice
  - Share anti-racist practices for staff and leaders that disrupt bias
  - Center Indigenous voice and knowledge, self-determination and sovereignty.
- "How do I cultivate belonging and voice, when what students are saying might be uncomfortable?"
- Partnership and connections with Elders, students, families, and community as a leadership strategy

# Leading Through Change at Oskāyak

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*"I Had a Plan... and Then I Had to Lead."*

*Community Called Me Home*

*The Plan Was Solid. Reality Was Messy.*

*Steer the Course and Resist Damage Centered Narratives*

As a bi-racial Michif/Métis woman, navigating leadership in colonial institutions often feels like performing what some call the "colonial dance" (2017) moving between expectations, perceptions, and imposed standards of professionalism while resisting erasure or colonial dominance.

This tension is part of the lived complexity as a bi-racial Indigenous women in leadership and requires constant reflexivity and boundary work.



**We are an Urban Indigenous school rooted in history, love, responsibility, and resurgence.**

*"The purpose of education at Oskāyak High School is to provide a safe, stable environment that enables students to experience academic success and personal healing.*

*This is encouraged by maintaining balance in all aspects of life: mind, body, emotion, and spirit."*



We believe our students can and will learn when we nurture the right conditions. That means:

Reducing crisis by centering consistency: students in classrooms, with tools in hand, learning every day.

Empowering students beyond systems: out of survival mode and into self-determination.

Honouring community trust: by listening, upholding our promises, and walking alongside families and our kitōtēminawak Council.

Accelerating learning through engagement: meeting learners where they are, and guiding them forward with high expectations and deep wrap around support.

Mobilizing innovation rooted in land, language, culture, ceremony, and relevance, not just new tools, but meaningful, sustainable practices students and families believe in.

- This is the work. This is Oskāyak



# What I've Learned (So Far) ...

- A strong plan, rooted in vision
  - Challenges: staff turnover, trauma, pressure
  - Lateral violence and white fragility are realities and barriers
  - Stayed the course with community and courage
- Start with story, not policy (OSK is the alternative experience for FNM youth in an urban context) Remember our collective why? Constant negotiations
  - Relationships before results (be ok with the extended graduation plans)
  - Be okay with learning out loud and get comfortable, being so uncomfortable
  - Rooted in The kitōtēminawak parent/community advisory council to correlate Indigenous student success with family success, community success, nationhood success



# Supporting Student Success at Oskāyak High School

- Historical Trust in Community
- Outcome-based assessment, Thinking classrooms, Math Foundations sections, Land-based learning, nêhiyawêwin language sections, ceremonies, community engagement
- Art based methodologies, storytelling, and centering student voice through art and film
- Identity affirmation = academic success
- Decolonizing school spaces through daily practice – ITEP PDS School and ceremony.
- Our data backs up the vision and outcomes.

The Saskatchewan School Boards Association (2022) emphasizes that effective Indigenous education requires self-assessment, strategic planning, and partnerships, such as land-based and language camps, that centres Indigenous knowledge systems and promote self-determination and sovereignty in student outcomes.





# “What does it mean to lead with heart and history within your leadership context and community?” Group Task

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**Heart** (values, love, care, community)

**History** (personal, systemic, or community truths we carry)

**Action** (how heart and history show up in your leadership work)

1. On a sheet of paper: make a column of 3
2. Reflect
3. Add 1 or 2 ideas to each column
4. invite a circle to close, “In one word, what are you carrying forward from this reflection?”
5. Go around the circle, allowing each person to speak a single word aloud.
6. Closing reflection, shake hands



- Invitation to continue to step into this work, we must walk together
- Jaltenberg@gscs.ca
- space for questions
- *Kischii maarsii, have a restorative summer!*