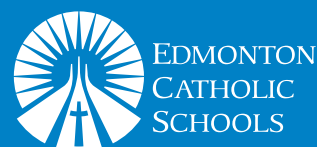




FIRST NATIONS, MÉTIS AND INUIT
HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION
COACH PROGRAM



A low-angle shot of several graduates in blue gowns and caps, jumping and throwing their caps into the air against a bright blue sky with some lens flare. The scene is outdoors on a grassy area with trees in the background.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES FOR FNMI STUDENTS?



Implement an innovative program that provides comprehensive, individual, in-school support for FNMI students.

Edmonton Catholic School District has significantly increased graduation rates for First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) students at St. Joseph High School. It has accomplished this through an innovative FNMI High School Graduation Coach Program that provides comprehensive, individual, in-school support for FNMI students. Read on to learn about the graduation coach program, and how you can introduce a similar program in your school.



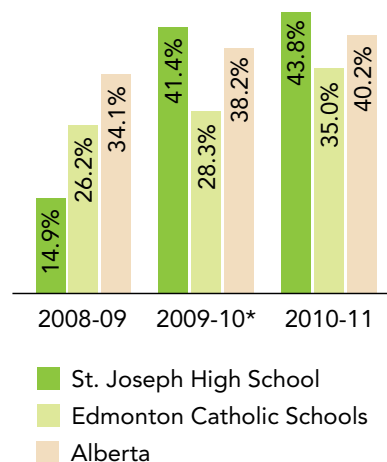
HOW IT STARTED

In 2009, Edmonton Catholic Schools established the FNMI High School Graduation Coach Program at St. Joseph High School in central Edmonton. Approximately 130 students per year receive graduation coach services through the Braided Journeys Room, a resource room with tables, chairs, computers and a large wall of windows. The Braided Journeys Room adjoins an office for the graduation coach, a tutor and an Aboriginal liaison. Students come and go freely. Physically, the Braided Journeys Room is simple; the number of staff employed is minimal. But the achievements of the graduation coach program are remarkable.

Hugh MacDonald, the principal of St. Joseph High School, sees this achievement as more than just numbers. He believes that FNMI students had felt “invisible,” but now feel they have a home at the school.

Because of its success, the graduation coach program expanded to Archbishop Oscar Romero and St. Francis Xavier High Schools in 2012-2013 and will be introduced to Archbishop O’Leary High School in 2013-2014.

FNMI 3 Year High School Completion Rate –
St. Joseph High School, Edmonton Catholic Schools
and Alberta



**FNMI Graduation Coach Program starts at St. Joseph High School*

The graduation rate for FNMI students at St. Joseph High School was 14.9 per cent in 2008-2009 school year. Today, at 43.8 per cent, it surpasses the provincial FNMI rate.

WHAT IS A GRADUATION COACH? WHAT MAKES THIS PROGRAM SO EFFECTIVE?

The high school graduation coach program has been successful in many settings. The program was first implemented in the U.S. state of Georgia. It has been adapted to meet the needs of Aboriginal students in South Dakota and now Edmonton.

Pamela Sparklingeyes is program manager for Aboriginal learning services at Edmonton Catholic Schools. She saw that the role of the graduation coach resonates with traditional Aboriginal culture, where adults have provided friendship, guidance and support to children and youth outside of their own immediate families.

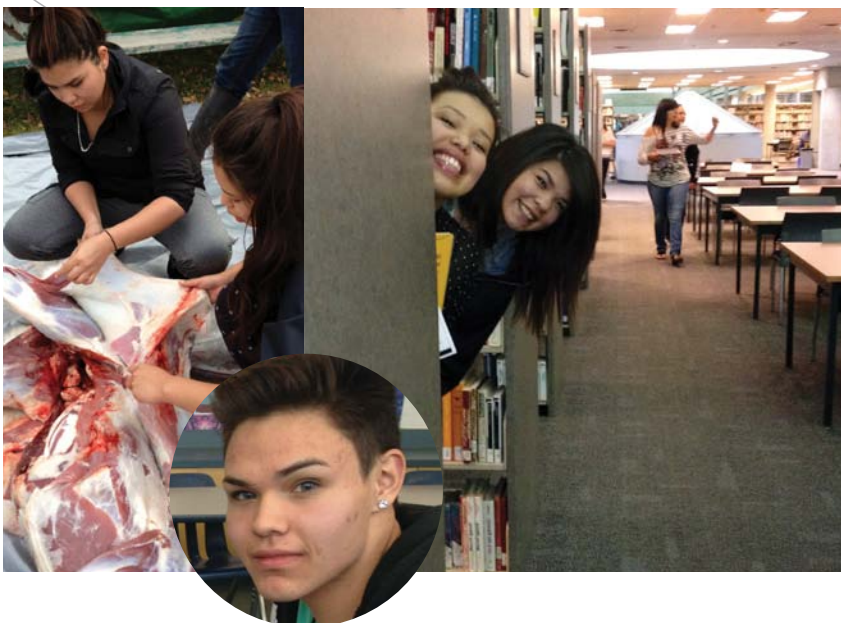
Thus, the graduation coach, in the Aboriginal context, works to restore the social and cultural systems that once guided youth, including mentoring. Pamela says, "We promote positive outcomes rather than simply preventing negative ones. In the work of the graduation coach, significant learning is accompanied by significant relationships. The two are never separate."

With a small staff, the FNMI High School Graduation Coach Program seamlessly provides support to students, whether in special events or throughout the school day. Just how well is demonstrated in the following two stories.

THE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION COACH PROGRAM FOCUSES ON:

- **Relationships and mentoring** – building close, supportive relationships with students.
- **Transitions** – addressing the high dropout rate between Grades 9 and 10, and supporting transitions between high school and post-secondary school.
- **Culture** – developing a sense of belonging through cultural activities.
- **Career planning** – exposing students to career possibilities and supporting their pursuit.
- **Academics** – tutoring, course planning, peer mentoring and role modeling.
- **Parental engagement** – encouraging dialogue between parents, school and student.

The graduation coach program is a stellar example of learner-centred education as described in *Inspiring Education*, the Alberta government's vision for education to 2030.





Mikyla's mom confesses: "When I first met Elyse, it felt like she was stepping into my territory. Why was she so involved with my child? Did she have an ulterior motive? Was she checking up on me? But Mikyla liked her. She asked why don't I like her – why don't I give her a chance. And I did."

MIKYLA'S STORY

Mikyla is a Grade 11 student at Archbishop Oscar Romero High School. She lives on the Enoch Cree Nation along the western edge of Edmonton with her mother, stepfather, two of her three siblings, and her stepbrother, who also attends the school. Mikyla studies hard, works part-time, plays on the volleyball team, and is acting in a drama production of the *Miracle Worker*.

The day we meet her, Mikyla is staying for tutoring in English after school. "I'm staying for help with *The Life of Pi*. I was told to stay after school – I need a push," she says without a trace of discomfort.

The one pushing her is Elyse Wood, the high school graduation coach. When Elyse saw Mikyla falling behind in English, she called Mikyla's mother about the outstanding assignments, and personally tutored Mikyla. When the assignments were not handed in two weeks later, Elyse called again. Mikyla's mother came in to see Elyse, who had already spoken with Mikyla's English teacher. Together they arranged for more tutoring. Mikyla's mother assured Elyse that Mikyla would complete her work over the weekend, which she did.

Mikyla is grateful for this push: "Many (FNMI students) have the potential to finish high school, but lack the push. It's easy to get down on yourself, to say that I can't do this, I'm not good enough." Mikyla is fortunate: she has two people telling her she is more than "good enough." She credits her mother with pushing her through junior high, and now both her mother and Elyse are making sure she gets through high school.

"I've never had anyone push for me at school before. Now I'm close to Elyse. She's my second Mom – Ina* – and the others feel that way too. We share food and talk. If I have hurt feelings, I come here. Without her here, it would be weird."

*Ina means mother in the Stoney language.

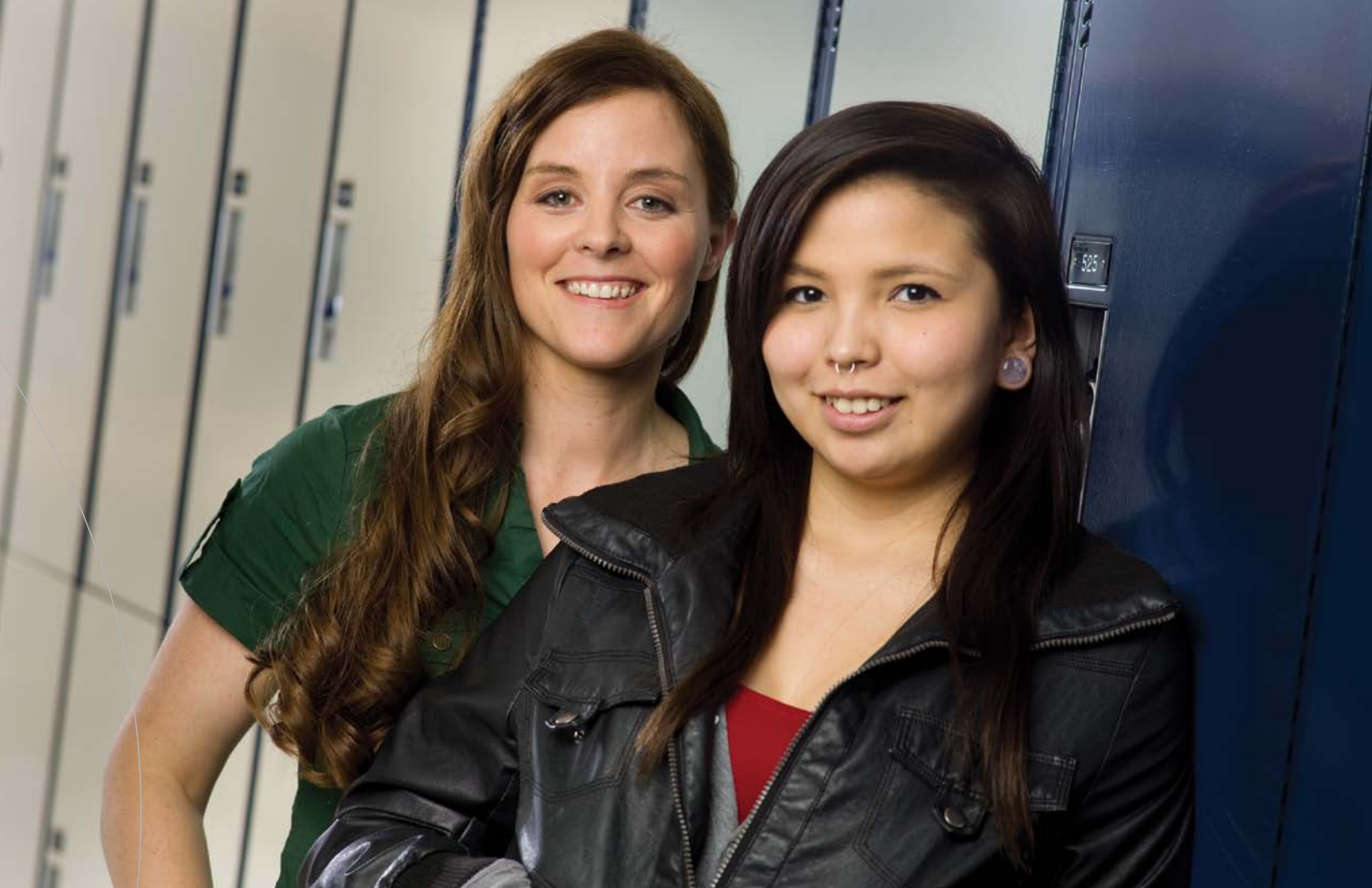
Mikyla contrasts that to her first year at Archbishop Oscar Romero High School, where she sometimes felt invisible. The school had an Aboriginal liaison worker to deal with problems as they arose, a common approach to serving FNMI students. However, other than monthly pizza lunches, there wasn't a lot of opportunity for interaction. "I wasn't aware of events and opportunities that I could participate in."

In addition to supporting Mikyla's academic endeavours, Elyse has advocated for Mikyla with the principal and other teachers. After one particularly hurtful episode involving a classmate, Mikyla's mother says she may have pulled her daughter out of the school if not for an intervention by the graduation coach and her team.

She praises coach Elyse Wood: "Elyse is proactive. She sets goals, sets the bar high, and helps students figure out how to reach it. Mikyla doesn't have a lot of great examples who can show her the end result – no aunts, uncles, grandpas or grandmas. Elyse shows them the courses and the marks the students need and she pushes them."

She is also impressed that Elyse can provide an unrivalled range of services, from helping students in need obtain independent living support to applying for grants for group travel abroad. "Elyse is aware of what is going on in their world. She gets involved before the issues occur."

The irony of all this? Mikyla's mom confesses: "When I first met Elyse, it felt like she was stepping into my territory. Why was she so involved with my child? Did she have an ulterior motive? Was she checking up on me? But Mikyla liked her. She asked why I don't like her – why don't I give her a chance. And I did."



THE GRADUATION COACH-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Elyse Wood is the graduation coach at Archbishop Oscar Romero High School. She had been working with Aboriginal peoples in rural Australia for four years when she learned about some of the work being done by Edmonton Catholic Schools. She signed on, and moved to Canada. She and Pamela Sparklingeyes set up the first graduation coach program at St. Joseph High School. Then Elyse moved to Archbishop Oscar Romero High School to set up a graduation coach program there. Today her base is not a classroom, but a large office.

Unlike St. Joseph High School which uses a seminar system, Archbishop Oscar Romero High School operates with regularly scheduled classes. This structure works for many of the students. "Between classes, about 15 kids come through to touch base. My office is a locker for many of the 40 FNMI kids at the school," says Elyse. She flips open the room's cupboards, now appropriated as lockers.

As she speaks, one boy stops by to ask for a pencil; another asks if she will be around for the two weeks of exams in January. Others peek through the window to see who is visiting today. "I think of the students as my nieces and nephews. They come at the beginning and end of lunch, too; usually a group of about 10. They study here, do on-line courses. I tutor them and provide academic counselling. It's safe and comfortable here."





Richard is planning to go to the University of British Columbia to study environmental engineering. He believes in living the green life and caring for the world. He says: "In this room, I find a part of me – through the beliefs, values and traditions. If you keep in touch, they will help you succeed."

RICHARD'S STORY

Richard enters the Braided Journeys room at St. Joseph High School. He walks past six boys with faces glued to two computer screens along the wall, and past two enormous pillows in the centre of the room. One orange and one blue, they are as big as small beds, ready for students to flop on during exam week. Once inside the quiet Braided Journeys side office, he speaks about his experience with the graduation coach program.

He says that he lives in Clareview, the northeast corner of Edmonton, with his father, who often works out of town, and three siblings. He commutes to St. Joseph High School because, even though he knew no one there at first, he wanted something different, specifically its PSDL – personal self-directed learning system. He likes PSDL in that it emulates the style of post-secondary learning, which he believes most regular students come to encounter as a shock. He is planning to go to the University of British Columbia to study environmental engineering. He believes in living the green life and caring for the world.

On his first day at St. Joseph High School almost three years ago, his teacher advisor walked him to the Braided Journeys room, which serves as the base for the graduation coach program. He has been coming to the room almost every day since, not so much for tutoring or to study, but to socialize with everyone.

He finds the Braided Journeys room most rewarding for the social support it offers. He talks to the graduation coach Anita Lafferty, every day, and he knows the majority of students who come through the room. "It's a safe, comfortable place for Aboriginal kids to express themselves. I've done the hand drumming, the sweats, and beading." These activities are offered to everybody in the school, he notes. Generally he enjoys sports and the arts.

The program also offered Richard the opportunity to travel to Ottawa with Encounters with Canada for an entire week which he describes as “an unforgettable experience.”

Richard practices Aboriginal culture at home, like smudging, a purification ceremony involving the burning of sacred medicines like sweetgrass. But he encounters a wider range of cultures at school. “Last week an Inuit spokesperson brought us fish and frozen whale blubber. I was hesitant”

Anita supports Richard’s plan for the future by providing diploma preparation books, planning for UBC, and motivating him to get there. “If you keep in touch, they will help you succeed,” he says.

When asked what was his best experience through Braided Journeys, he doesn’t hesitate: “the annual Culture Camp. It’s three days of games, canoeing, skinning a moose, building a sweat lodge and ceremonies for 30 students.” It’s special partly because camping has not been a family activity for him.

“In this room,” he says, “I find a part of me – through the beliefs, values and traditions.”



THE GRADUATION COACH CAN BE A KINDRED SPIRIT

Anita Lafferty is the graduation coach at St. Joseph High School. Of Dene and Cree background, she grew up moving constantly across the western provinces and the Northwest Territories. She finished high school in Edmonton, completed certificates in micro-computing and medical transcription, then studied nursing for two years. At that point, she met Pamela Sparklingeyes, manager of the Braided Journeys program, and started volunteering as a mentor.

Anita discovered that her background helped her relate to the students extraordinarily well. She left nursing and pursued her calling as a teacher.

"I can relate on a lot of levels to the difficulties these kids face on a daily basis, not feeling comfortable in school due to poverty, racism, lack of self-esteem or motivation," she says. "I understand and listen to their needs and can help them overcome obstacles. Students have someone to connect with who can help them with their educational journey."



THE SCOPE OF THE GRADUATION COACH PROGRAM

The services of the graduation coach program extend beyond those described in the stories of Mikyla and Richard. They include:

RELATIONSHIPS AND MENTORING

Every September the graduation coach meets with every FNMI student to exchange contact information; introduce the services of the graduation coach program; and start a career plan.

At a minimum, there are monthly check-ins. The graduation coach monitors absences, late slips, behaviour referrals, class performance and the number of graduation criteria met, as well as the participation of the student in school events.

The mentoring motivates students, opens up exploration of possible careers and supports all of the program activities that follow.

TRANSITION SUPPORT

For some students, the first step into a new school or a different classroom can be incredibly hard. It helps that one of the first faces FNMI students see upon entering school is that of their graduation coach. At St. Joseph High School, Anita Lafferty waits by the front door to welcome students, paying particular attention to Grade 10 students, many of whom she met at transition functions a few months earlier or at registration and orientation days.

Because more FNMI students drop out in Grade 10 than either Grades 11 or 12, the graduation coach program focuses on the transition between junior and senior high. It starts in the first month of Grade 9 with the graduation coach meeting with feeder schools to plan activities for the year. The coach visits the schools once a month thereafter. Over the year Grade 9 students become aware of the program; they ask questions about high school and explore career aspirations through vision boards and career inventories.

Transition activity then moves to the high school and becomes more oriented to supporting peer interaction. It includes tours, social mixers, preparation classes, and summer school – including the Career and Life Management Program – which lets students experience high school classes and accumulate credits in July and August. There is also a 24-hour summer transition camp, culminating in a campfire session where questions and concerns are anonymously submitted on paper, discussed by the group, then offered to the Creator in a burning ceremony.

Once school starts, transition support continues with special events – icebreakers, games, and social mixers for Grade 10 students – as well as an orientation session for newcomers in the higher grades. Transition support picks up again as students prepare for post-secondary study. Group tours are arranged with local institutions; students have the opportunity to spend a week at post-secondary schools such as MacEwan University in Edmonton.





CULTURAL ACTIVITIES AND STUDENT CLUBS

Cultural activities and student clubs serve to develop a sense of belonging and provide access to positive role models and peer support. Cultural activities include pow wow dancing, smudging, Elder visits, drumming, feasts, outdoor education camps, creative arts, and traditional ceremonies. Students participate in the Literacy Mentorship Program, where they read to elementary students, and clubs like the Rainbow Spirit Dance Troupe and Rainbow Spirit Drum Group. They also have access to an artist-in-residency.

CAREER COUNSELLING

After cultural ceremonies and activities, students in the program are most likely to engage in career counselling. The graduation coach asks students what they aspire to and helps them understand the paths that will lead them there. In addition to helping students sign up for the right courses, the coach keeps post-secondary school information on site, helps students get information that is not at hand and assists students to apply for scholarships and post-secondary assistance.

ACADEMIC SUPPORTS

The high school graduation coach and other team members (i.e., tutors) introduce themselves to all teachers at the first high school staff meeting. The team ensures the teachers understand the significance of Aboriginal history and culture; they make classroom resources and workshops available as well.

The graduation coach monitors student academic performance and, at a minimum, will discuss it with the student's parents after the first semester. Tutoring is one of the most used services in the program, and is often provided or arranged by the graduation coach.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Developing parental engagement has been perhaps the biggest challenge for the graduation coach program. Many FNMI parents have negative associations with school, many as a result of family experience in residential schools.

The graduation coach personally connects with a minimum of four parents every month to discuss their children's academic standing and the activities, services and interventions accessed. After the first semester, the coach contacts all parents to discuss their children's success in the first semester. A newsletter keeps parents updated about program activities.

Graduation coach Elyse Wood says, "I find that once I have phoned home once or twice, the parents start calling me to raise their concerns, to seek community resources and to update me on what's going on in the student's personal and family life. As a result, parents start to feel safe and the school starts to become a community hub."

The graduation coach program also encourages parental engagement through special events like "Bannock and Tea" during "Meet the Teacher" evenings. A Christmas Feast in December is one of the most effective means of bringing parents in for the first time, and also attracts Grade 9 families from feeder schools. A special Grade 12 honouring ceremony is held in May involving students, parents and administration.

HOW TO INTRODUCE A GRADUATION COACH PROGRAM IN YOUR SCHOOL

The graduation coach program in Edmonton has augmented the U.S. model to innovatively fit the needs of Alberta youth. The program's relatively low cost – about \$850 per student at St. Joseph High School – is money well spent. The benefits of increasing FNMI graduation rates are clear: studies have shown that FNMI graduates can expect to earn up to \$428,000 more than non-graduates over their lifetime. They can earn \$1 million more if they complete a university degree. To support programs like this, schools can take advantage of government grants or funding such as the \$1,000 per FNMI student provided to all school authorities in Alberta.

St. Joseph High School Principal Hugh MacDonald believes the program's benefits far outweigh costs, "Even the youth who don't graduate within three years of starting high school will find their way and benefit from the program eventually."

The following steps will help you start a similar program in your school.

Step 1

GET SUPPORT FROM YOUR SCHOOL DIVISION AND SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

What you will need:

- Funding for the graduation coach and any tutoring not provided by the coach, regular teaching staff or volunteers.
- Funding to support cultural and recreational activities and transition camps. Many activities are offered by volunteers or outside groups. For example, the University of Alberta offers instruction for a fitness club at St. Joseph High School.
- A room in which to house the program. At St. Joseph High School, the Braided Journeys room is quite large with an adjoining office. At Archbishop Oscar Romero High School, the program is housed in an office. St. Francis Xavier High School uses a room that once served as a staff room. You need a designated space large enough to house a desk and space for students to work – they need to feel like this is their space, their home away from home.

The entire program at St. Joseph High School is budgeted at \$100,000 a year (see table below) including staff – a tribute to the resourcefulness of administrators and the generosity of the community. The program is supported, in part, by Edmonton Catholic Schools' use of per-student FNMI funding allocated to all school authorities in Alberta. In addition to government funding, partnerships with private industry are a source of funding for this type of program. Edmonton Catholic Schools has also received funding from the City of Edmonton (Family and Community Support Services) in the past.

FNMI High School Graduation Coach Program Budget – St. Joseph High School

Expenditure	Amount
Travel – participant transport to post-secondary schools, career conferences, etc.	\$2,000
Groceries and catering – ceremonies, family nights, leadership and after-school clubs	\$5,000
Field trips	\$5,000
Professional fees/honoraria – Elders and cultural instructors	\$5,000
Supplies and equipment – office supplies, workshop materials, computer stations, etc.	\$5,000
Youth workshops – conference and workshop registration fees	\$5,000
Graduation coach – full-time	\$65,000
Tutors – part-time	\$8,000
TOTAL	\$100,000

Step 2

HIRE THE RIGHT GRADUATION COACH

- The graduation coach must have an understanding of FNMI cultures, the passion to help students succeed, and the ability to build relationships with students, parents, teachers and administrators. It takes a special person with the right mix of skills.
- Specifically, the graduation coach must be able to:
 - » Identify students at risk of dropping out by considering academic records, behaviour and attendance, expectations and family status.
 - » Develop intervention strategies for each student, including plans for transition support, graduation and career attainment.
 - » Assemble a graduation team for each student, including teachers, family and other resources from both inside and outside of the school.
 - » Support the relationships of the student and team, including regular mentoring of the student and assessment of progress.
- At a minimum, the graduation coach will need a:
 - » Degree or diploma in education, counselling, school psychology or social work plus three years of directly related experience working with at-risk secondary students.
 - » Knowledge of Aboriginal culture and high school curriculum.
 - » Experience addressing behaviours that put students at risk; knowledge of available social services, community supports and alternative education opportunities.



Step 3

SET UP THE PROGRAM

Now that you've hired your graduation coach, it will be his or her job to set up the program. Start by developing an implementation plan including timelines. Here are the key things to consider:

Study Room (Braided Journeys Room)

- Make sure your space is healthy and clean and has room for learning, tutoring and accessing technology.
- Put up bulletin boards and update regularly.
- Ensure there are snacks and lunch foods available for students who might need them (local churches have been generous in supporting the food program).

Technology

- Get access to the on-line student record system (e.g., Power School), web-based assessment tool (e.g., eLuminate) and the booking system your school uses.
- In Alberta, teachers registered with the Alberta Teachers' Association have access to the Extranet which houses information about student performance – make sure you are linked in.



Assemble a team

- Make sure the principal is aware of your role in the school. The assistant principal can help identify academically at-risk students, as well as those with discipline and/or attendance problems.
- Identify others who can support the graduation coach program. This includes the school's FNMI liaison and counsellors.
- Department heads can assist in garnering academic assistance from teachers and tutors. Teachers can share their knowledge of the students and serve as mentors.
- Special education co-ordinator(s) can help identify youth with special needs and assist in delivering appropriate services.
- Externally, social workers can help identify community services.
- Post-secondary institutions can help provide specialized programming and support orientation and transitions. Cultural organizations, Aboriginal organizations and Elders can support the cultural elements of the graduation coach program.

Get to know your school

- Attend staff meetings and introduce yourself to teachers and students.

Step 4

GO!

Now you are ready to offer the services described in this document: relationships and mentoring; transition support; cultural and academic support; career planning and parental engagement. If you need more information, check the contact information on the following page.





This document was produced in partnership by:

Edmonton Catholic Schools (contact pam.sparklingeyes@ecsd.net)

Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada (contact elizabeth.seale@aadnc-aandc.gc.ca)

Alberta Education (contact gabrielle.christopherson@gov.ab.ca)



Edmonton Catholic Schools
Learning Services – Enhancement
9624 - 108 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T5H 1A4
Tel: 780.944.2000
E-mail: info@ecsd.net
www.ecsd.net

