Niigaan Gdizhaami Project Booklet

2024-2025

Inspiring Stories of Language, Culture and Land-Based Initiatives from Participating First Nations



KINOOMAADZIWIN EDUCATION BODY

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Introduction

The Niigaan Gdizhaami Fund (the Fund) is an annual grant established by the Kinoomaadziwin Education Body (KEB) and the Ministry of Education. The objective of the Fund is to support and invest in community and joint projects that advance the objectives of the Master Education Agreement (MEA).



There are five guiding priorities that guide the development of Niigaan Gdizhaami projects. The priorities of the Funds are:

1. Increasing knowledge and understanding of Anishinabek histories, cultures, perspectives, languages, and contributions (“Bimaadziwin”) and traditional Anishinaabe knowledge passed down from one generation to the next through ceremonial teachings (“Kendaaswin”);

2. Enhanced opportunities for the engagement and participation of Anishinabek students, families, and communities to support Anishinabek student success and well-being;

3. Facilitating the successful transition of students between Anishinabek First Nations’ schools and schools in the provincially-funded education system;

4. Innovation and introduction of leading practices in Indigenous education; and

5. Supporting collaboration between the Anishinabek Education System (AES) and Ontario District School Boards, including data and information sharing.

Disclaimer

The reader will notice different spellings of the words Anishinaabe, Anishinabek, Anishinaabemowin, and Anishinaabmwin. These words are spelled differently to honor and respect the many different dialects throughout the Anishinabek territory.

Summative Information

In 2024-2025, the Niigaan Gdizhaami Fund ("NG Fund") supported 16 First Nations to complete twenty-five projects impacting over 3,300 students across the Anishinabek Education System (AES).

A total of $940,180 was allocated to the twenty-five approved projects funded by the NG Fund. Although the initial funding for the NG Fund was set at $750,000, the Kinoomaadziwin Education Body (KEB) recognized the importance of all twenty-five approved projects for students, communities, and educators. As a result, KEB committed additional funding to ensure that all projects could move forward.

16
Participating First Nations

25
Projects Implemented

$940,180
Invested in Community Projects

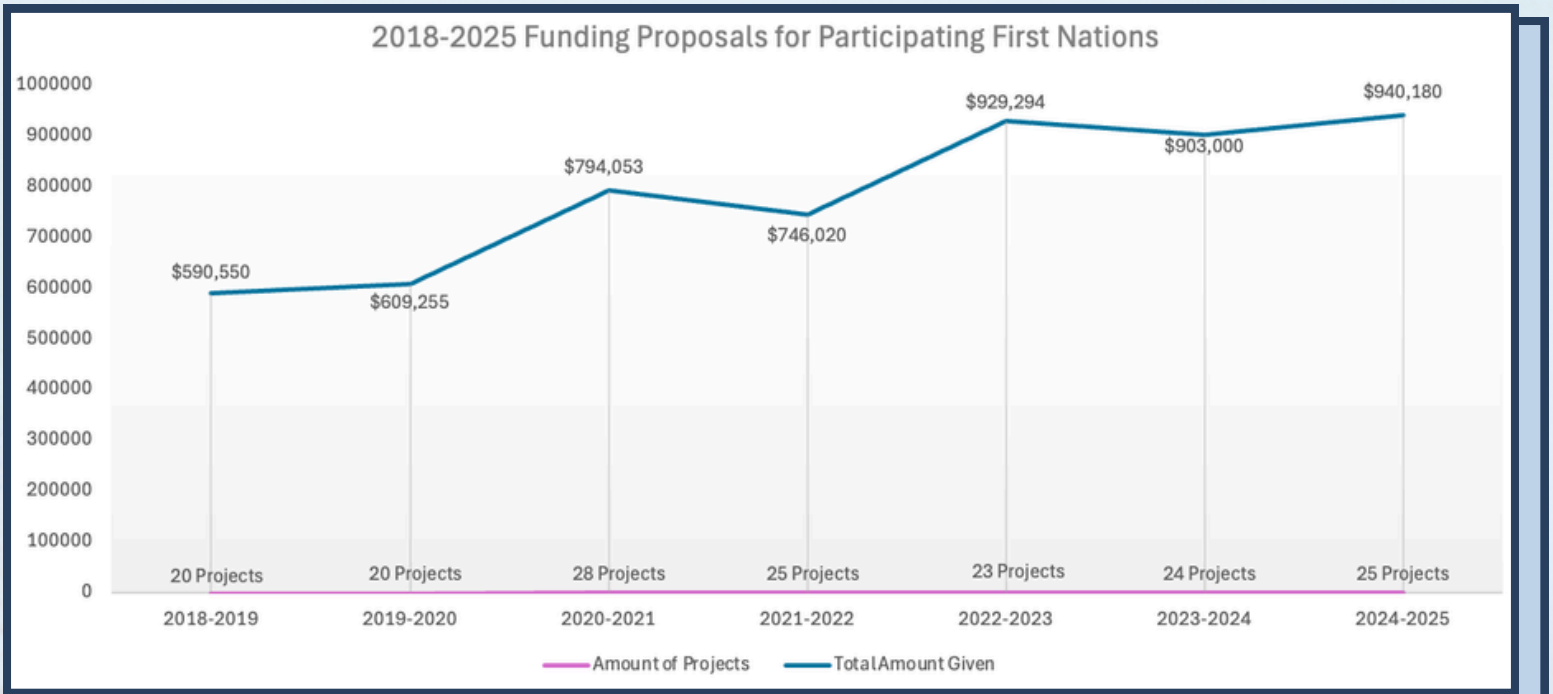
3,300+
Students Supported Across the AES

Each year, the NG Fund receives more proposals, which in turn, leads to more funding requested from the First Nations. Below is a breakdown of the total amount of funds requested through proposals by the First Nations:

From 2018-2025

165
Projects Supported

$5,500,000+
Funded to various First Nations Projects



General

The First Nations have continually provided evidence and advocated for the inclusion of many NG Fund projects as core programs within the AES. While each project was distinct, each brought significant positive outcomes for Anishinabek students and were centered around five common themes:

1. Cultural Knowledge/ Cultural Advisors
2. Student Support/ Student Well-Being
3. Land-Based Learning
4. Language
5. Youth Leadership

In 2024-2025, the NG Fund assisted 16 First Nations that included twenty-five projects impacting over 3300 students across the Anishinabek Education System (AES). The positive impact on students can be summarized through the following outcomes:

14 projects had increased attendance	**16 projects built strong relationships with staff**
9 projects had an increase in credits achieved	**16 projects had an increase in graduation rates**
19 projects had increased engagement	**17 projects had learning growth**
16 projects included skills developed	**18 projects had an increase in cultural knowledge**
16 projects had an increase in Anishinaabemowin use	**19 projects included connections with community**
15 projects included building relationships with peers	**19 projects built trust with educators/community members**

Student Support/Student Well-Being

Student Support Worker

Netmizaaggamig Nishnaabeg





Number of Students Involved:
40

Project Summary:

There has been a significant need for an advocate to support Netmizaaggamig students at their high school. The Netmizaaggamig students leave the community to attend high school and supporting the students during this transition is needed. A Student Support Worker (SSP) was hired to support student academic achievement, wellbeing and belonging.

The SSP had organized workshops and events focusing on Anishinabek histories, cultures, and languages. They had also played a key role as a liaison between Marathon High School and the community, ensuring that students were aware of available opportunities. The SSP had regularly updated families on students' progress, achievements, and needs, and had assisted both students and families in understanding academic pathways while emphasizing the importance of consistent attendance.

Linkages to Student Success:

The community reported an increase in student credit accumulation during the year, with students earning 56 of the 57 credits attempted in the first semester and 55 out of the 58 attempted credits in the second semester. Four students earned their Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). There was a slight increase in parent engagement and a significant rise in community involvement. Ongoing efforts focused on creating opportunities to strengthen connections between the school, the School Board, and the community. Collaboration with other community departments also increased, with many actively supporting education and student engagement. For example, the Lands and Resources Department invited high school and elementary students to learn about fishery defense, the walleye spawn, and conservation.

Opportunities for Development:

Netmizaaggamig Nishnaabeg identified opportunities to expand cultural programming by involving more knowledge keepers and elders. It also recognized the need to strengthen family engagement and planned to create additional opportunities to encourage greater participation. Continued focus on these areas was emphasized as a priority.

Impact on Student Success:



Student Support/Student Well-Being

Student Support Worker

Biigtigong Nishnaabeg

Number of Students Involved:
40

Project Summary:
Throughout elementary school, Biigtigong students attend school on-reserve with their peers. To attend high school, students from Biigtigong Nishnaabeg travel to the neighboring municipality to attend school in the provincially-funded school system. A NG Fund project was developed to hire a Student Support Worker to assist students in navigating the school system, advocate on their behalf, and provide comfort, academic support, and overall guidance.
The Student Support Worker met with teachers, made referrals, and served as a liaison between the community and school staff ensuring relevant information to all parties. The role also involved implementing consistent, individualized plans to best meet each student's unique needs. By being consistently present in the school, the Student Support Worker ensured that students had the academic, cultural and well-being support services they need to be successful.

Linkages to Student Success:
Student credit accumulation was identified as a crucial priority. By monitoring ongoing challenges and providing timely interventions before failure became a risk, students received the support they needed to stay on track and successfully earn their credits. In the last term, BN students achieved 78 of 84 possible credits.
Attendance for most students ranged from good to excellent. Parents became more informed, the community became more involved with the high school students, and overall communication improved significantly.

Opportunities for Development:
Additional support staff would be highly beneficial. This level of support should receive automatic funding, as requiring First Nations to continually reapply for such essential resources —despite clear evidence of their impact—creates an unnecessary burden.

Impact on Student Success:



Student Support/Student Well-Being

Indigenous Academic & Wellness Counsellor

Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek

Number of Students Involved:
25

Project Summary:

The Indigenous Academic & Wellness Counsellor played a vital role in supporting secondary students from Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek (BZA). The Counsellor provided daily academic and wellness support, offering students a safe space to express themselves, develop life skills, and strengthen positive mental health strategies.

The Counsellor organized a range of cultural activities, including sewing, drumming, Elder visits, harvesting practices, fishing and teachings on the medicinal uses of fish, water teachings, land-based learning and certifications, language camps, canoeing, kayaking, and camping.

The Counsellor also coordinated additional supports as needed. Students participated in lunch-and-learn sessions and met with principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, and special education staff. The Counsellor conducted monthly progress meetings and contributed to transition planning for students moving from Grade 8 to Grade 9. Additionally, the Counsellor arranged monthly family dinners where strong attendance was recognized and celebrated.

Linkages to Student Success:

Two students who are close to aging out and have struggled with credit accumulation have participated in the Indigenous Trades course and developed strong, trusting relationships with staff. Staff have committed to supporting these students with credit recovery, and as a result, both students are now on a clear path to graduating next year.

In addition, Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek has partnered with Nip-Rock High School's Indigenous Trades Program to build tiny cabins over the summer. This initiative has generated interest in the skilled trades among our students, with two students already expressing a strong interest in pursuing trades-related pathways.

Opportunities for Development:

Parent engagement in supporting students is currently limited, with an expectation that support staff will assume primary responsibility for student success. Moving forward, it is important to strengthen shared accountability and reinforce that student success is best achieved through a collaborative approach involving the student, parents or caregivers, support staff, and the school working together.

Impact on Student Success:



Student Support/Student Well-Being

7TH Fire Alternative School

Chippewas of Rama First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
25

Project Summary:

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chippewas of Rama First Nation observed a significant increase in youth disengagement from education, reflected in lower attendance, incomplete credits, and declining graduation rates. Whereas previously only one or two students struggled to graduate, more than 15 students had withdrawn from traditional high school environments, moved off roll, or sought alternative learning that met their specific needs. Existing School Board alternative programs were not sufficiently engaging, prompting Rama to address student disengagement through an Anishinaabe approach to learning and youth engagement.

In response, Rama collaborated with their School Board to develop a First Nation land-based program that allowed youth to engage in education in a new way while still completing credits toward an Ontario Secondary School Diploma (OSSD). The first semester of this pilot program focused on students who had been completely disengaged. During the pilot, students spent time outdoors daily, participating in community ceremonies, teachings, harvesting, medicine-making, and other learning and relationship-building activities.

Rama sought funding to expand the program to a full year, enabling students to access knowledge keepers, travel to sites for harvesting and fishing, and learn practical skills such as building shelters and fires. The program aimed to improve student engagement, attendance, assignment completion, and credit attainment, while also supporting social, emotional, and spiritual well-being through Anishinaabe cultural teachings and ceremonies. Over the school year, the land-based learning incorporated teachings, such as fishing, harvesting, medicine-making, bushcraft, and lessons on the Seven Grandfather Teachings.

Linkages to Student Success:

7th Fire had an exceptional first full school year, marked by remarkable growth among its students. Beyond academics, the program emphasized connection to spirit, self, family, and community, creating an ideal environment for students to discover their strengths and achieve personal goals.

Personal Growth

Students demonstrated significant personal growth throughout the year. One student discovered a passion for protecting water during a week with Water First. Another found a love for perseverance through sessions with Grey Wolf Canada, beginning each morning with planks alongside the teacher. During an overnight trip to the remote YMCA Camp QE, several students overcame fears of isolation and successfully spent the night away from home. Another student, initially afraid of heights, faced that fear by climbing a rock wall at Climb Muskoka with peer encouragement.

Student Support/Student Well-Being

7TH Fire Alternative School

Chippewas of Rama First Nation

Linkages to Student Success cont..:

Personal Growth cont..:

Students increasingly incorporated Anishinaabemowin into their daily conversations, supporting one another through balanced leadership, humility, and collaboration. These efforts strengthened their confidence, independence, and relationships.

Relationships

Many students initially hesitated to engage in cultural activities. However, with the guidance of knowledge keepers, crafters, and elders—always offered with choice and respect—they began to participate more fully. Several students eventually facilitated ceremonies, circles, and knowledge sharing in their own ways, helping to sustain cultural traditions.

Peer relationships evolved to become more supportive and understanding. Students and families reported improved communication and conflict resolution both at school and at home. They also gained awareness of intergenerational trauma and privilege, recognizing their responsibility to develop and model healthy coping strategies.

Through community events such as trades, education, and health fairs, students built connections with local organizations and learned to seek support when needed. Trust between students and staff deepened, with many choosing to stay beyond school hours for mentorship and celebration of achievements. Over time, students developed confidence in advocating for themselves and addressing systemic barriers.

Academics

The year concluded with five graduates, bringing the total to six since the classroom's opening in February 2024. Twelve students made the honour roll—six in February 2025 and six in June 2025. Seven students prepared to re-enter mainstream school to complete prerequisites for post-secondary studies. One student earned their first credit after three semesters of perseverance in overcoming mental health challenges.

By June, ten of fifteen students had secured summer employment. Among the five graduates, three enrolled in post-secondary programs for September, one pursued a trade, and another planned to travel before entering nursing in September 2026.

Student Support/Student Well-Being

7TH Fire Alternative School

Chippewas of Rama First Nation

Opportunities for Development:

There should be freedom to integrate Indigenous knowledge, skill development, and respect into safety practices in a meaningful way. Indigenous youth are traditionally taught using foundational, step-by-step approaches that emphasize the safe and effective use of tools. This learning process also instills respect—for oneself, for others, for the tools, and for the task at hand.

In partnership with the school board, our First Nation has identified areas of conflict where differing practices and priorities arise. While the concern for liability is valid and important, it should not hinder opportunities for experiential learning—particularly in a community committed to revitalizing traditional ways of knowing and being.

Current Ministry of Education regulations are broad and often do not account for the unique needs of individual communities. As a self-governing First Nation in education, we aim to work collaboratively with the school board to review and adapt policies that currently restrict Indigenous youth from engaging in the layered, intentional learning experiences that are central.

Impact on Student Success:





Student Support/Student Well-Being

Student Success & Wellbeing Part II

Aundeck Omni Kaning

Number of Students Involved:
40

Project Summary:

Aundeck Omni Kaning (AOK) had become aware of an escalation in mental health issues among its student population, including cases of self-harm in youth—something the community had never previously observed in such a young group. To address these concerns, AOK proposed creating a safe and comfortable learning environment for students while implementing initiatives to curb self-harm behaviors.

The plan included running a series of 20 educational and cultural activities over a ten-month period at the tutor building, designed to support mental health and wellbeing while incorporating traditional teachings and cultural practices. The goal was to increase participation among students, parents, grandparents, and community members by 25%.

Planned workshops included topics such as grief, the 13 Turtle Teachings, depression, Dodemaag (clan teachings), feasting ancestors, self-harm awareness, safe social media use, maple syrup candy making, peer pressure and bullying, stress and relaxation, spring celebrations, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) awareness, human trafficking, strawberry picking, and healthy body image.

In addition to workshops, AOK aimed to provide culturally relevant resources and materials reflecting the experiences and perspectives of Anishinabek students. Community members were invited to share their knowledge through guest lectures, workshops, and program outings. AOK also planned to host family nights and cultural gatherings to foster connections between parents and educators, allowing families to share concerns and learn strategies to support their children's education.

The community implemented a filmmaking and theatre training program, offering students meaningful opportunities to develop creative, technical, and leadership skills while strengthening their connection to Anishinaabe culture and traditions.

Student Support/Student Well-Being

Student Success & Wellbeing Part II

Aundeck Omni Kaning

Linkages to Student Success:

One of the youth participants entered the film and theatre training program with limited experience in the arts and initially felt shy about performing in front of others. Through hands-on workshops and guidance from mentors, the student gradually developed confidence and began to explore storytelling through both acting and camera work.

The Aundeck Omni Kaning First Nation has expressed strong support for the filmmaking and theatre training program for youth. This initiative aligns with the Nation's commitment to fostering cultural expression, skill development, and community engagement. By providing young people with opportunities to explore storytelling, digital media, and performance arts, the program enhanced technical and creative abilities while strengthening confidence, leadership, and connection to cultural traditions.

AOK recognizes the value of programs that empower youth to celebrate and share their culture while preparing them for future educational and career pathways. The Nation remains dedicated to supporting initiatives that promote the wellbeing, success, and cultural pride of its members, and is committed to building upon this program to create long-term benefits for both youth and the broader community.

Opportunities for Development:

Increased attendance, increased engagement, skills developed, building relationships with peers, confidence, self-esteem, communication, teamwork, strong relationships with staff, learning growth, increase in cultural knowledge, connections with community, built trust with educators and community members.



Impact on Student Success:

confidence, self-esteem, communication & teamwork

Student Support/Student Well-Being

Translating Cultural Stories & Activities into Safety Practices

Nipissing First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
100

Project Summary:

The Ontario Physical Activity Safety Standards in Education (OPASSE), developed and managed by Ophea since 1986, were recognized by the Ontario Ministry of Education as the minimum standard for risk management practices in physical activity across publicly funded schools. Through this project, Nipissing First Nation collaborated with Ophea to create a framework for translating cultural stories and traditional activities into recognized safety practices.

The project addressed the gap between existing safety standards and the unique cultural activities of Nipissing First Nation—such as moose processing, bone tool making, sweat ceremonies, and fire making—which were not reflected in current systems of risk mitigation. This gap had contributed to challenges in establishing credibility with insurance companies and government bodies regarding safety due diligence.

Nipissing First Nation community members and Ophea worked together to identify safety priorities for higher-risk cultural activities and established a working group composed of school safety leaders and community representatives. A knowledge translation strategy was developed to strengthen safety practices and provide training on new methodologies.

The project concluded with an evaluation of its impact, demonstrating increased capacity within Nipissing First Nation to document and implement safety practices for cultural activities, as well as improved understanding within Ophea of how to enhance the cultural relevance of the Ontario Physical Activity Safety Standards in Education.

Opportunities for Development:

An opportunity was identified to increase meaningful engagement with students, Elders, and community members in both the development and delivery of safety standards. Involving community voices more deeply strengthened the sense of ownership, cultural connection, and long-term sustainability of the safety standards and related programming.

The Implementation Guide that was developed provided a strong foundation for the community, which could be further enhanced through future initiatives such as hands-on workshops, intergenerational knowledge-sharing sessions, and student-led projects designed to support learning and leadership. There was also potential to offer regional training sessions and adapt materials for use in other schools. In addition, the intentional inclusion of Indigenous languages and the establishment of a community-led advisory group could further support cultural continuity and relevance. These enhancements would deepen the overall impact of the work and contribute to a model that could be shared more broadly across communities.

Student Support/Student Well-Being

Translating Cultural Stories & Activities into Safety Practices

Nipissing First Nation

Linkages to Student Success:

Through this partnership, the two organizations created safety standards for harvesting and developed an Implementation Guide rooted in Indigenous knowledge and aligned with provincial safety frameworks. This Guide provided a thoughtful, step-by-step process for integrating traditional land-based activities into schools in ways that promoted student safety, teacher confidence, and community trust.

Throughout the project, students flourished. They deepened their connection to the land, earned practical certifications such as Food Handler training, and learned cultural practices with care and respect. In doing so, they developed humility, purpose, and a stronger sense of responsibility to both their ancestors and future generations. Informal conversations and working sessions also strengthened the bond between the school and community, creating a shared sense of pride and belonging.

Community members and parents embraced the initiative, recognizing how the safety standards supported sustainable, respectful harvesting practices. Nipissing First Nation's Walking Alongside Program expressed enthusiasm for how this work would guide youth safely on the land, and positive feedback poured in about the Nbisiing Naadziwin Program. The collaboration inspired confidence and strengthened relationships, reinforcing community support for culturally grounded, land-based learning.

Partnering with Ophea empowered Nbisiing to enhance student health and safety while honoring tradition. Ophea's guidance on documenting and translating cultural practices into safety frameworks helped build professional capacity and created tools—like the Implementation Guide and Excel template—that will continue to support future initiatives.

The partnership's success was celebrated beyond the community, with presentations at the Niigaan Gdizhaami Forum and the PHE Canada National Conference in 2025. The work inspired other Indigenous communities and educators to consider similar approaches, underscoring the project's meaningful impact.

Ultimately, this collaboration became more than a project—it was a journey of learning, respect, and shared purpose. Together, Nbisiing and Ophea built a living model that safeguarded students, strengthened cultural continuity, and nurtured the well-being of both the school and the community.

Impact on Student Success:



Student Support/Student Well-Being

Program Facilitator/Graduation Coach

Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
40

Project Summary:
The Chippewas of Georgina Island identified two key area of need. School attendance remained a concern in both the provincial schools and the First Nation school, and student engagement in social activities—both on and off reserve—also required improvement.
To address these needs, the Chippewas of Georgina Island implemented the role of a Grad Coach to support students. The Grad Coach accompanied students to regular activities on and off reserve and was present at Sutton District High School to ensure consistent class attendance. The Grad Coach liaised with teachers and facilitated additional academic support as needed.
The Grad Coach also monitored student progress, attendance, and academic performance, while providing guidance and support for social and emotional challenges.

Linkages to Student Success:
The Grad Coach role was recognized as a proven success. The Ministry of Education shared data demonstrating the positive outcomes for students in schools where the Grad Coach was present. Feedback from students highlighted the importance of having staff in schools who understood them and their backgrounds. The initiative aimed to build on this success by incorporating similar positions into the model of educational services.

Opportunities for Development:
The Chippewas of Georgina Island expressed a desire for the support person to be available in person both at the secondary school and on the island - in a designated workspace for students requiring an alternative setting at any time. The community emphasized that providing alternatives to formal classroom environments was important and central to student success, as each student's needs were unique.

Impact on Student Success:



Language

BZA Language Camp

Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek

Number of Students Involved:
40

Summary of Project:
Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek (BZA) Language Camp focused on providing high school students with opportunities to connect to language through medicine, ceremony, games, and land-based activities.
Students were grouped into teams to participate in six different sessions throughout the camp that incorporated a variety of learning approaches, including bingo, storytelling, land-based learning, medicine, crafts, and music. While students engaged in learning throughout the camp, the program also had a broader impact on the community. Elders attended each session, and if a lesson sparked a memory of a teaching or way of being, the Elder's story was documented.
All lessons were recorded on video, with the goal of developing a teaching library. In addition, a resource library was planned to further support language learning and cultural knowledge.

Linkages to Student Success:
This year, the Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek hosted six teachers over a three-day period. Each session focused on preparing students for a mini language bowl. Two community Elders participated in each session, supporting students by monitoring language use and sharing knowledge of the First Nations dialect.
The Language Camp was expanded this year to include intermediate-aged students. A key highlight was the strong performance of these students, who placed third and fourth. This achievement reflects their commitment and progress in the process of language acquisition.
Evening programming included medicine teachings, boat rides to the pictographs, traditional games, and a film presentation on the history of Spirit Bay. Strong participation from both students and Elders was evident throughout the daytime and evening activities, contributing to a meaningful and well-attended program.

Opportunities for Development:
A key challenge identified this year is parental engagement. In order for language revitalization efforts to be successful and sustainable, active parental involvement is essential.
Moving forward, the next language camp will intentionally include parents to encourage greater participation and support language learning within the home. In addition, specific presentations led by Elders will be organized to strengthen and preserve the language, with parents formally invited to attend and engage in these sessions.

Impact on Student Success:



Language

Chi-Map of Atikameksheng

Atikameksheng Anishnawbek



Number of Students Involved:
250

Summary of Project:

The education team of Atikameksheng Anishnawbek supported children and their families in learning the Anishinaabemowin names for nearby lakes and towns, while collecting family stories connected to these locations. These collected materials were shared on both a digital map and a laminated paper map and displayed at the Library, Waasakawa Early Learning Center, and the Community Centre.

In addition, Chameleon Readers were preloaded with Anishinaabemowin content.

Children and families were able to listen to books in Anishinaabemowin, check out the Chameleon Readers, and interact with the digital map to hear the Anishinaabemowin words for locations on the map.

Linkages to Student Success:

Families demonstrated increased connection to the language through the mapping activities. The maps facilitated meaningful conversations among groups of families in attendance, prompting discussions of stories associated with specific locations and the use of Anishinaabemowin. These interactions encouraged increased family participation in subsequent mapping events. In addition, parents expressed a desire for expanded opportunities to learn alongside their children both at community events and within the home.

Opportunities for Development:

The Chameleon devices were not suitable for outdoor use due to their reliance on infrared technology and were also subject to back-order limitations. As a result, an opportunity was identified to explore alternative methods of sharing Chi-Map content, including the use of QR codes to increase accessibility and usability.

Impact on Student Success:



Youth Leadership



Youth Leadership Through Land-Based Learning

Aamjiwnaang First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
40

Summary of Project:

This project was designed to support student learning and leadership by enabling youth to design their own learning, build relationships, foster a safe environment within the school and community, and gain hands-on experience learning from the land with Elders and Knowledge Keepers. These students formed a Youth Leadership Group.

The Youth Leadership Group participated in cycles of learning:

- First cycle of learning involved students learning from a local Knowledge Keeper about a topic personal to the entire group.
- Second cycle of learning involved students planning on how to raise awareness on the topic they learned about in the first cycle of learning. During this cycle of learning, students built on their sense of identity, belonging, and leadership skills.
- Third cycle of learning, the group of students decided and planned how they would act upon their learning in the first and second cycles of learning and spread awareness, built leadership, and built cultural competency throughout the entire school population.
- Fourth cycle of learning, the students reflected on their experiences and planned for the next topic to work through.

During the year, the Youth Leadership Group also built relationships with elementary-aged students, sharing their learnings and fostering strong connections that supported successful transitions to high school.

The program aimed to enhance students' sense of identity, well-being, belonging, awareness, and inclusion within the school and community. Participants developed leadership, teamwork, and mentorship skills, while strengthening partnerships and relationships among the school, families, and community members.



Youth Leadership

Youth Leadership Through Land-Based Learning

Aamjiwnaang First Nation

Linkages to Student Success:

Students with more than one year of experience in youth leadership began the school year with the goal of connecting with peers who were new to the school. Those in grades 10–12, familiar with youth leadership and with established relationships with educators and the community, took the opportunity to share their experiences and the importance of youth leadership with new students. This peer-to-peer engagement proved highly impactful for both the youth sharing and those listening. One student reflected on her experience: she had initially hesitated to join as a ninth grader but later recognized the value of participation, stating that being part of the group was both enjoyable and rewarding.

A notable example of student growth occurred over the summer, when a youth who had learned about a program through the spring career fair participated in a summer initiative. She returned to school with increased excitement, confidence, and commitment to her personal development and future pathway. Another student, reflecting on his multi-year involvement, emphasized the skills, relationships, and sense of belonging he gained through the program, highlighting memorable experiences such as contributing to a mural that would remain at the school for years to come.

This year, a new development allowed students who began youth leadership in grade 8 to continue their involvement as grade 9 students. Unlike in previous years, these students engaged immediately, demonstrating familiarity with the program and a strong desire to connect. Their participation enhanced continuity and fostered early engagement in leadership activities.

Throughout the year, youth leadership activities included creative and community-focused initiatives. Students began by making gifts for survivors, beading poppies to honor veterans, and learning from local entrepreneurs at a career fair. These activities inspired one student to propose a student-led entrepreneurial initiative, later named “Kidwinship,” which encouraged youth to develop ideas, raise funds, and create opportunities for future activities. Local entrepreneurs were invited to provide guidance, further enriching the students’ learning experiences.

Brainstorming sessions guided planning for subsequent learning activities. Students identified topics of interest, including addictions awareness, which led to the development of a day focused on Mino Bimaadiziwin. The youth engaged with invited speakers and reflected on the experience, describing their learning as fostering connection, spirit, healing, happiness, relationships, peace, friendship, centeredness, well-being, and caring.

This spring, the mentorship component of youth leadership was strengthened through the involvement of a youth-alumni who had completed grades 10–12 and maintained contact in her post-secondary studies. She returned to serve as an Independent First Nations Youth Representative for her community and participated in weekly sessions with current youth leaders. Together, they planned school-based activities, trips, and a graduation ceremony. The youth-alumni emphasized the importance of consistent and relatable mentorship, offering encouragement, guidance, and goal-setting support, while sharing her own experiences to build confidence, resilience, and a sense of belonging among the students. Her leadership reinforced the value of embracing Indigeneity and fostering community connection.

For a glance at Aamjiwnaang First Nation’s youth, please click this link: *https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1K-Epk1zfc4Ub_bo-cna8Fvz3-THSa7FtlW0DIrawi1o/edit?slide=id.g36be48cfd3a_0_26&pli=1#slide=id.g36be48cfd3a_0_26*

Youth Leadership

Youth Leadership Through Land-Based Learning

Aamjiwnaang First Nation

Opportunities for Development:
Supporting youth learning and voice will remain a priority, with youth leadership considered an ongoing commitment. Youth can be mentored in lead roles by Elders, Knowledge Carriers, and community partners, including during the planning of a powwow. This experiential mentorship will strengthen their leadership skills, confidence, and community relationships.

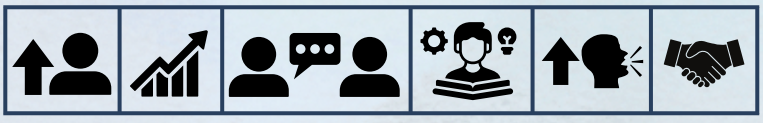








Impact on Student Success:







Increased development of identity and belonging, increased opportunities for mentorship, increased awareness of pathways opportunities

Youth Leadership

Seven Grandfathers First 4.0 - Media Campaign

Wasauksing First Nation



Number of Students Involved:
500

Summary of Project:
In the second year of this student-led initiative at Parry Sound High School, students worked to address ongoing issues of racism within the school community. Recognizing the need to spark meaningful dialogue, the students led the project under the mentorship of a Wasauksing First Nation Councillor.

Building on the previous year's t-shirt campaign, the students expanded the initiative into a multimedia campaign designed to promote understanding of the sacred gifts and foster a stronger sense of community within the school. The project also included regular circles with Elders and Knowledge Keepers to support intergenerational learning and guidance.

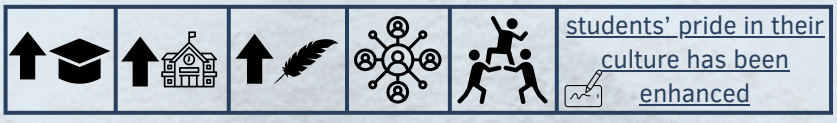
Participation was limited to high school students to provide elementary students with something to anticipate as they advanced. Additionally, the students began developing a Seven Grandfathers-themed card game for primary-aged learners to explore the teachings in an engaging and interactive way. The group identified a student leader to oversee the program, formed a sales team, and planned outreach visits to share their story with other schools.

Linkages to Student Success:
The Seven Grandfathers First initiative became widely recognized as a Wasauksing First Nation-led project, with students and community members proudly wearing the clothing. Partnerships were established with several community organizations, including the Georgian Bay Biosphere Turtle Program, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), and B'saanibamaadsiwin, through the shared use of logos. The artwork from the initiative became a unifying symbol, featured in most community projects, and was embraced and celebrated by the broader community.

Opportunities for Development:
It was determined that the next step in the Seven Grandfathers First initiative would be to develop supporting materials, including a video, to address the ongoing presence of racism within learning institutions across the Near North District School Board.

Impact on Student Success:





Cultural Knowledge

Aani – Cultural Journey Together

Wahnapitae First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
150

Summary of Project:
Aani – Cultural Journey Together was developed to educate students, teachers, and staff about Anishinaabe people and culture. The program offered workshops on Ojibway culture and traditions, Indigenous protocols, traditional medicines, medicine walks, ceremonies, the Seven Grandfather Teachings, crafts, and cultural awareness. Its goal was to increase understanding of Indigenous histories, cultures, and contemporary issues. Teachings took place outdoors, weather permitting, in a yurt and teepee, with sessions held throughout the school year.

Linkages to Student Success:
Throughout the 2024–2025 academic year, the program achieved significant success. From September to June, more than 150 students participated in hands-on learning experiences focused on various trades and Indigenous crafts. These students represented schools from both the Rainbow District School Board and the Sudbury Catholic District School Board.
The noticeable growth in students' skills, confidence, and engagement reflected the strong impact of the programming. The initiative also positively influenced parental and community involvement. By engaging over 150 students from across the two school boards, the program generated increased interest from families and community members in the cultural and experiential learning opportunities provided.
The integration of Indigenous crafts and traditional knowledge fostered a deep sense of pride and cultural connection among families. Many expressed their appreciation for the opportunity their children had to meaningfully engage with their heritage through this initiative.

Opportunities for Development:
Looking ahead, there are clear opportunities to strengthen and expand the program. Increased funding would enable the hiring of additional staff to manage the growing number of students and improve program coordination. It would also support more consistent engagement with Knowledge Keepers and presenters, providing students with greater access to cultural teachings and hands-on learning opportunities.
Addressing these challenges would enhance student learning outcomes, deepen community relationships, and foster stronger family and cultural connections. With additional resources, the program could expand its community partnerships through more frequent cultural events, open houses, and family-centered learning initiatives, further enriching its overall impact.

Impact on Student Success:



Cultural Knowledge

Gikenjigwin Miikan Knowledge 3.0 and Gikenjigwin Miikaan – Knowledge 3.0 Phase 2

Wasauksing First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
400

Summary of Project:
The Gikenjigwin Miikaan – Knowledge 3.0 initiative employed a Cultural Coordinator who shared personal teachings and coordinated visits from Cultural Carriers, Knowledge Keepers, artists, and cultural advisors across schools. Recognizing that colonization had disrupted many First Nations communities' connections to culture and identity, the project aimed to restore traditional knowledge as a foundation for well-being and belonging.
The program delivered weekly school visits, each featuring a distinct cultural activity such as storytelling, drumming, arts, powwow teachings, and lessons on local Indigenous history and traditions. A visual journal documenting each school's journey was compiled into an audiovisual presentation. In addition, efforts were made to create and maintain a database of Cultural Carriers, Knowledge Keepers, artists, and cultural advisors to support future programming.

Linkages to Student Success:
The consistent presence of the Cultural Coordinator in the schools created a sense of comfort for both the First Nation communities and the Near North District School Board community.
Students participated in activities that contributed to the growth of pride and cultural ownership. Students also learned valuable cultural, organizational and leadership skills while supporting the planning of the powwow.



Cultural Knowledge

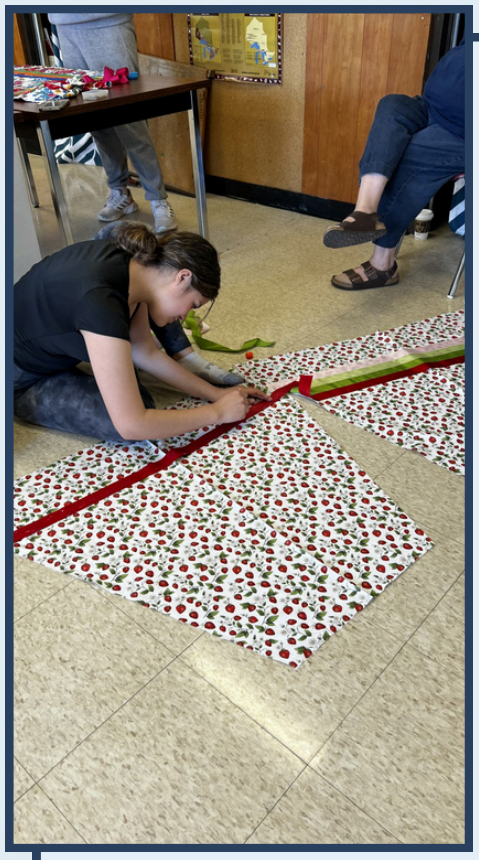
Gikenjigwin Miikan Knowledge 3.0 and Gikenjigwin Miikaan – Knowledge 3.0 Phase 2

Wasauksing First Nation

Opportunities for Development:
For other First Nations to assume leadership and management of the project.







Impact on Student Success:





Growth in pride and ownership of the students' culture.

Cultural Knowledge



13 Bjiinak Nga-Bi-Dgoshinmin "We Will Be There Soon"

Dokis First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
500

Summary of Project:
The project provided Indigenous knowledge from an Indigenous perspective to non-Indigenous educators. Dokis First Nation recognized that integrating Indigenous perspectives into education required more than a single professional development session. Non-Indigenous educators needed opportunities for deep learning, reflection, and ongoing growth in their understanding and practice of Indigenous education. By supporting educators in decolonizing the curriculum and strengthening their effectiveness, the project created opportunities for Indigenous students to see themselves represented as leaders in various academic fields.
The initiative included professional development on curriculum decolonization and Anishinaabemowin programming, an Indigenous Youth Leadership Retreat for secondary students, and learning powwows at local high schools. Additional components included weekly cultural programming in schools, Anishinaabemowin Sharing Circles, an Indigenous Youth Council Fall Gathering, and sustained connections with Elders.





Cultural Knowledge

13 Bjiinak Nga-Bi-Dgoshinmin "We Will Be There Soon"

Dokis First Nation

Linkages to Student Success:
Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth participated in reading Life in Two Worlds by Ted Nolan as part of their NBE course. Teachers used the book to promote meaningful learning experiences through text-to-self connections and discussions about leadership. In the spring, Ted Nolan visited West Ferris, speaking to Grade 11 students from across the Near North District School Board (NNDSB) both virtually and in person. He shared his story and engaged students in a Q&A session. The event concluded with a lunch for Ted Nolan and Indigenous youth from across the NNDSB, where each student received an autographed copy of his book. Students from the ASSP (Seven Stones) program at the Indigenous Friendship Centre also attended.
One student from Seven Stones Learning Centre felt a deep connection to Ted Nolan's story and later incorporated his book into one of her courses before graduating. The partnership with Dokis First Nation, including its Education Director and Administration, ensured smooth collaboration and supported meaningful engagement. The grant enabled community members to visit NNDSB schools, strengthening relationships that continue to support ongoing collaboration.

Opportunities for Development:
More cultural knowledge opportunities for students.



Impact on Student Success:





Cultural Knowledge

Indigenous Youth Retreat

Nipissing First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
100

Summary of Project:
The Youth Retreat for Indigenous students at St. Joseph-Scollard Hall provided two, four-day, land-based learning experience designed to strengthen cultural identity, academic success, and overall well-being. The Indigenous Youth Retreats aimed at empowering students by fostering pride in First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories, cultures, perspectives, and contributions. They also emphasized the importance of Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing within a contemporary global context.

The retreats featured teachings on Anishinaabe history, language (Anishinaabemowin), ceremonies, culture, and governance. Students participated in traditional practices such as offering tobacco to the fire, hands-on craft making, snowshoeing, and other land-based experiential activities. The program concluded with a digital student presentation showcasing their learning.

A curriculum resource booklet was developed to document the program and support future learning. Students also earned compulsory credit courses, participated in the Specialist High Skills Major in the Arts & Culture pathway, and worked toward their Grade 12 graduation and Indigenous Cultural Safety Leadership Certificate.

Impact on Student Success:
Increased attendance, increase in credits achieved, increased engagement, skills developed, increase in Anishinaabemowin use, building relationships with staff, strong relationships with staff, learning growth, increase in cultural knowledge, connections with community, built trust with educators/community members.

Cultural Knowledge

Indigenous Youth Retreat

Nipissing First Nation

Linkages to Student Success:

The Indigenous Youth Retreats at Camp Petawechuan was a transformative experience for Nbisiing Naadziwin students. Over two four-day sessions, students participated in traditional teachings, ceremonies, and hands-on learning guided by Elders and community Knowledge Keepers. These experiences deepened their understanding of identity and strengthened their connection to Anishinaabe culture.

Students reported feeling more grounded, confident, and proud of who they were. Several who had previously struggled with attendance or motivation re-engaged in school and expressed a desire to continue learning from Elders and through land-based experiences. The retreats also fostered community involvement, as families and community members participated and shared knowledge. Families expressed pride in witnessing their children's engagement with traditional teachings and ceremonies. Overall, the retreats strengthened intergenerational connections and created a meaningful space for students, families, and Elders to come together in celebration of culture and learning.

For a video showcasing the success of Nipissing First Nation's Land-Based Learning Series, please click the link below: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1PQ1GfkUqJSMTC3ul24ACj4Cqviz01rx-/view

Opportunities for Development:

There are significant opportunities to further strengthen partnerships with community Knowledge Keepers and Elders, whose teachings form the foundation of the program. Continued collaboration will allow for expanded learning opportunities where students can engage directly with traditional practices, including ceremony, craftwork, and the understanding of seasonal cycles.

Integrating these teachings more deeply into the Nbisiing program will enhance connections between students and the broader community. Plans include extending the duration of land-based retreats and ensuring consistent access to the cultural and linguistic wisdom of community mentors. Through these efforts, students will continue to develop a stronger sense of belonging, identity, and responsibility.

Impact on Student Success:





Cultural Knowledge

Honoring the Gifts Around Us (Phase 2)

Whitefish River First Nation

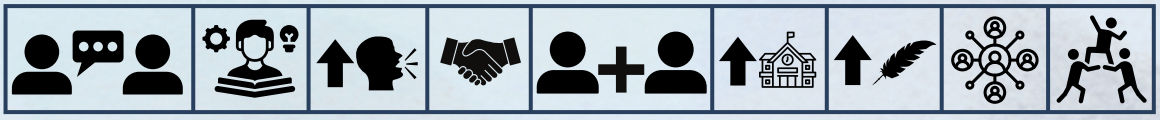
Number of Students Involved:
60

Summary of Project:
In this second phase of the project, Whitefish River First Nation focused on strengthening relationships and building meaningful connections among the school, students' families, and the wider community.
The initiative emphasized nurturing supportive relationships and creating a safe, positive, and caring school environment that upheld and enhanced Anishinaabe Aadziwin.
These goals were supported through family and community participation in cultural and seasonal celebrations. Students and families took part in activities such as a fall harvest fair, traditional teachings and ancestor honouring, sacred fire teachings, creating natural-material wreaths for the cemetery, a sugar bush harvest, the World Water Day walk, the Feast of Shkaamik Kwe, a school powwow, round dances, learning traditional songs and dances, a naming ceremony, and weekly guest speaker sessions to honour the gifts in their surroundings.

Linkages to Student Success:
Students began responding to greetings in Anishinaabemowin, demonstrating pride in their language and culture. They were provided with engaging opportunities to participate in community-based cultural and traditional events. Some students took on leadership roles in ceremonial tasks such as smudging and drumming.
They also showed a strong appreciation for the four medicines and consistently displayed respect for the medicines and Knowledge Keepers. Parents and guardians expressed joy in seeing social media posts highlighting student engagement and diverse learning experiences. As a result, families felt more involved and connected to the learning environment.

Opportunities for Development:
A continuing challenge of securing sufficient funding to provide meaningful and appropriate cultural and traditional teachings, as well as consistently finding Knowledge Keepers to support these activities. Opportunities to enhance the program includes collaborating with local organizations and partner agencies to strengthen students' self-confidence, pride, and appreciation for their peers.

Impact on Student Success:



Land Based Learning

Spirit Bay Elementary Language & Land Based Learning

Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek



Number of Students Involved:
40

Impact on Student Success:



Summary of Project:

The Language and Land-Based Learning Program at Spirit Bay Elementary School was guided by the belief of Biinjitiwaabik Zaaging Anishinaabek (BZA) that Anishinaabe peoples thrive when immersed in opportunities to learn about their identity and heritage. Under the direction of BZA Elders, it was understood that language learning must be connected to the land.

Through this program, Spirit Bay Elementary sought to help students explore questions such as: Who am I? Where am I from? What is my purpose? Where am I going?

Students participated in a variety of land-based and cultural activities, including bundle construction, language prayer, seasonal change ceremonies, shelter building, smoking and processing fish, moose, and geese, moose hunting, moose tanning, medicine picking, trapping, beading, fishing, storytelling, drumming, ceremony, hunter safety certification, hunter safety techniques, and archery training.

Linkages to Student Success:

Students participated in land-based learning experiences alongside Knowledge Keepers, including setting traps. During this experience, a beaver was successfully harvested. While some students required guidance, the overall outcome demonstrated that students thrived in the land-based environment and responded positively to hands-on, experiential learning.

Students also engaged in traditional food preparation practices, including plucking geese. Several older students, who were already familiar with the process, demonstrated leadership by taking the initiative to teach and support younger students. A similar mentorship dynamic was observed during gill net fishing activities, where older students guided younger peers in removing fish from the nets, fostering both skill development and peer leadership.

Parental engagement during these activities was notably strong. One parent attended a land-based learning event and assisted by operating the boats. In addition, he contributed valuable knowledge about the local lakes, further enriching the learning experience for students.

Opportunities for Development:

Land-based learning outings consistently demonstrate strong levels of community, student, and parental engagement, contributing to their ongoing success.

To further support the effective delivery of these programs, access to a designated vehicle for staff use would be beneficial. Currently, staff members rely on their personal vehicles to attend and facilitate these events. Providing a dedicated vehicle would enhance safety, accessibility, and overall program sustainability.

Land Based Learning

Looking Toward the Future: A Land-Based Learning Project at Waabgon Gamig First Nation

Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation

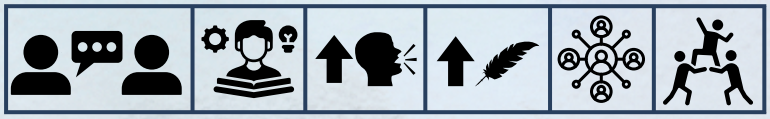
Number of Students Involved:
100

Summary of Project:
At Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, a new garden space was being developed. In preparation for the garden, students researched the medicinal properties of the trees and plants, planned the placement of trees and plants, and learned how to care for gardens to be planted at their school. Once the garden was established, the students actively participated in their ongoing care.
Planting fruit trees and establishing new gardens provided students with opportunities to acquire new knowledge and skills while connecting with traditional knowledge, including the teaching and learning of Anishinaabemowin and Anishinaabe culture.

Linkages to Student Success:
Students became attuned to the connections between outdoor and land-based learning opportunities, as demonstrated through ongoing circle discussions in cross-curricular settings. Designing outdoor spaces and understanding that growth and change would occur proved exciting for students. The transition from design to actual planting provided valuable, hands-on learning experiences.
Program and project planning that cross-generational connections helped to strengthen the relationship between the school and community. To support the project, experts in gardening were engaged to connect their knowledge with teaching and learning. Involving these field experts allowed teachers and students to experience a full circle of learning, enriching both the educational and community aspects of the program.

Opportunities for Development:
The Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation will continue to strengthen their partnership with Morning Glory School, their York Region District School Board partner school. Their plan includes connecting with students at provincial schools and fostering partnerships that promote shared learning across communities. Additionally, the Chippewas of Georgina Island will actively seek out new partnerships by exploring opportunities to connect with other schools through REC 4 colleagues.

Impact on Student Success:



Land Based Learning

Fostering Connections and Sense of Self Through Land-Based Learning

Aamjiwnaang First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
150

Summary of Project:
The project aimed to foster connections and relationships between Indigenous families and the school system. Aamjiwnaang First Nation operates an elementary school for students in kindergarten to grade 3. In grade 4, students transition to an off-reserve school. The community observed patterns of disengagement that began around grade 6 for some students. When students were disengaged in elementary school, they often continued this pattern into secondary school which impacted credit accumulation and graduation.
The project focused on early intervention and student engagement, supporting identity development, self-awareness, addressing bias, and increasing opportunities for positive connections with the secondary school. To achieve this, seasonal land-based learning opportunities were facilitated for grade 5 and 6 classrooms.
Students engaged in traditional learning on the land at Aamjiwnaang First Nation under the guidance of an Indigenous knowledge keeper. Activities included homesteading, medicine walks, traditional food preparation and cooking, storytelling, arts, powwow participation, quill work, and beading.

Linkages to Student Success:
During this project, there was a noticeable increase in student engagement when learning or engaging in cultural traditions. More students wore ribbon skirts to school and spoke positively about their culture. One student, who had previously struggled with attendance, participated in many class trips and showed eagerness to learn about his heritage.
Indigenous students were enthusiastic about teaching their non-Indigenous peers traditional sports, including lacrosse and snow snake. A very shy student demonstrated pride in her culture by wearing full regalia and participating in the Lambton College Pow Wow.
Many parents volunteered to accompany students on various trips throughout the year. The Sir John Moore Pow Wow received substantial positive feedback from community members and families.

Opportunities for Development:
It would be highly beneficial to connect with other local educators who are organizing similar lessons and activities to share ideas and resources.

Impact on Student Success:



Land Based Learning

Indigenous Land-Based Learning Series

Nipissing First Nation



Number of Students Involved:
100

Summary of Project:

Students at St. Joseph-Scollard Hall participated in Land-Based Learning opportunities designed to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of contemporary and traditional First Nation, Métis, and Inuit histories, cultures, perspectives, and contributions. Through this program, students developed the ability to challenge commonly held but often inaccurate sociocultural ideas and perspectives. The learning experiences equipped them with tools, strategies, knowledge, and habits of mind to value equity and inclusiveness, promote positive change, and contribute to building healthy, prosperous communities. The initiative also supported stronger partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

The goals of the project were for students to:

1. Revitalize Nbisiing Nishnaabemwin through authentic land-based learning experiences;
2. Make personal connections to advance understanding and respect for Indigenous cultures, languages, histories, rights, and global perspectives, while recognizing the vital role of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in Canada's development;
3. Think critically and creatively about issues affecting Indigenous peoples and applying key concepts from Indigenous Studies to real-world inquiries about diversity, nation-to-nation relationship building, the environment, social justice, and cultural identity;
4. Build respectful and reciprocal relationships to support reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and Canadian society;
5. Develop essential skills, strategies, and habits of mind that foster culturally competent, interdisciplinary learning through research and inquiry;
6. Use technology effectively to gather and analyze information, solve problems, and communicate;
7. Build a digital repository of reconciliation in action through Anishnaabemwin, reflecting land-based learning activities centered on Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing; and
8. Create, in phase two, a curriculum resource booklet documenting the land-based learning series.

The Land-Based Learning events included ice fishing, maple syrup harvesting, hide scraping and tanning, building a teaching lodge and facilitating school events to commemorate National Indigenous Peoples Day.

Land Based Learning

Indigenous Land-Based Learning Series

Nipissing First Nation

Impact on Student Success:
Increased attendance, increase in credits achieved, increased engagement, skills developed, increase in Anishinaabemowin use, building relationships with peers, strong relationships with staff, learning growth, increase in cultural knowledge, connections with community, built trust with educators and community members.

Linkages to Student Success:
This year's land-based learning program provided students with rich, hands-on experiences guided by community knowledge keepers. These activities fostered deep connections to culture, identity, and the land. A highlight of the program was when students became teachers themselves, leading sessions for visiting Grade 6–8 classes and demonstrating remarkable growth in confidence and leadership.
The program also strengthened relationships with families and the wider community. Parents and Elders expressed pride in seeing youth engage with traditional teachings, while community involvement in student presentations created a strong sense of unity and shared purpose.
Now a cornerstone of the school's approach, the program integrates language, culture, and curriculum to nurture students holistically—mentally, spiritually, physically, and emotionally. This success has been made possible through the ongoing support of the Niigaan Gdzhaami Fund, which helps students learn in ways that honour their identities and heritage.

Opportunities for Development:
There are ongoing opportunities to strengthen connections with community knowledge keepers, whose teachings remain central to the Nbisiing program. By increasing time spent on the land and incorporating more traditional practices—such as harvesting, food preservation, and seasonal activities—students can continue to learn through authentic, land-based experiences that reflect traditional ways of knowing. Ensuring knowledge keepers remain an integral part of the program will help students stay grounded in the cultural values, practices, and teachings that sustain the community.

Impact on Student Success:





Land Based Learning

Forest School Study Phase 2: Programming Delivery Study

Nipissing First Nation

Number of Students Involved:
60

Summary of Project:

The Forest School initiative was designed to help children connect with the land and learn experientially, reflecting the traditional ways their ancestors once learned. This modern adaptation of traditional learning—known as Forest School—was based on evidence showing that students in open, natural environments learn more effectively and consistently by focusing on tasks within a calm, sensory-rich setting.

The Forest School, for children ages 6-13, integrated the local Nipissing First Nation dialect and culture into children's experiential learning on and from the land. All planned activities subtly incorporated expectations from the Ontario curriculum. Local Elders shared teachings and built relationships with students in a natural, fluid environment. The programming reinforced numeracy, literacy, and other subject areas through culturally grounded, traditional methods of the Nipissing people. Teachers focused on interpreting curriculum expectations in a way that aligned with Indigenous pedagogies.

Building on data collected during Phase 1, this phase of the project moved beyond identifying strengths and gaps in Nipissing's resources to implementing strategies that actively engaged students. The goal was to enhance students' self-esteem, confidence, and sense of family and community values through a cultural lens.

Goals of the Forest School included:

- Developing knowledge of Indigenous food sovereignty and related history;
- Mapping and locating local harvesting areas;
- Deepening understanding of culture and food systems;
- Learning about growth expectations for local Indigenous plants;
- Gaining knowledge of traditions and protocols;
- Engaging in experiential learning through planting, harvesting, fertilizing, water science, growing techniques, and reciprocal relationships;
- Revitalizing traditional educational practices within a modern, Ontario curriculum-aligned framework; and
- Establishing a foundational understanding of Forest School pedagogy in contrast to the standardized industrial education model.

Land Based Learning

Forest School Study Phase 2: Programming Delivery Study

Nipissing First Nation

Linkages to Student Success:
This year saw a significant increase in enrollment, which can be attributed to strengthened community connections and effective promotion of the program. Growing interest each year reflects the trust and confidence families have in the learning opportunities provided. Students demonstrated pride in their achievements—whether through arts and crafts, hands-on science activities, or expanding their understanding of their history and culture. Their curiosity was evident as they asked thoughtful questions and eagerly shared personal stories, showing deep engagement in their learning.
The land-based and outdoor curriculum proved to be an essential resource. Its clear structure, thoughtful design, and flexibility allowed staff to adapt activities to the interests and needs of the children. The curriculum exceeded expectations by offering a wide range of activities that supported the six-week program while embedding Indigenous knowledge, cultural worldviews, and language throughout. This approach enriched the overall experience, helping youth strengthen their cultural identity and develop a meaningful connection to the land and traditional ways of learning.

Opportunities for Development:
A key area for future growth is the continued integration of cultural teachings to ensure youth have meaningful opportunities to connect with their traditions and identity. Increasing access to Elders would greatly enrich the program, as their stories and guidance provide valuable lessons that support students in their daily lives. Strengthening trust and building deeper relationships with community knowledge keepers will also be essential, creating the foundation for sharing teachings in a respectful, impactful, and culturally grounded way.

Impact on Student Success:



Land Based Learning

Handcrafted Birch Bark Canoe Build

Michipicoten First Nation



Number of Students Involved:
25

Summary of Project:
This project is deeply rooted in longstanding cultural traditions and promotes collaboration, knowledge sharing, and the transfer of traditional skills. Students participate in hands-on learning using materials such as split cedar ribs, traditional bark, split spruce root stitching, gunwales, and planking. With guided instruction, they learn to identify and select appropriate materials while applying techniques passed down through generations.

Through the teachings of Charles Commanda, participants gain pride in traditional craftsmanship and deepen their understanding of Indigenous knowledge systems. His approach fosters cross-cultural awareness and strengthens connections among families and communities. The canoe-building process reinforces the importance of responsible citizenship, living in harmony with all living beings, and recognizing the fulfillment that comes from creating something by hand.

Project Outcomes:

- Improved knowledge of traditional methods for sourcing and selecting canoe-building materials
- Increased understanding of the history of canoe use and construction techniques
- Enhanced cultural awareness and appreciation
- Knowledge of harvesting practices for bark, spruce, and cedar
- Hands-on experience participating in canoe-building activities
- Strengthened sense of community, encapsulated by Charles Commanda's belief in "bringing people together—one stitch, one boat, one project, and one illuminating shared moment at a time."





Land Based Learning

Handcrafted Birch Bark Canoe Build

Michipicoten First Nation

Linkages to Student Success:
Students reported a stronger sense of cultural identity because of their participation. One student demonstrated notable leadership by working alongside the Naturally Superior instructors and mentoring peers throughout the project.
In addition to learning canoe construction techniques and the traditional materials involved, students received teachings on how and where to responsibly harvest these materials within the local area. Schools also have opportunities to invite Mahigan (Marcel Labelle) or knowledge keepers from other First Nations or Métis communities to facilitate classroom sessions where students can create miniature birch bark canoes, further enriching their cultural learning experience.

Opportunities for Development:
This activity offers a valuable opportunity to engage the community in a family-oriented setting, where parents can participate and act as guardians for students involved in water-based activities. However, health and safety requirements become more challenging when non–band-run schools are involved. Many school boards restrict or prohibit water sports unless extensive policy requirements are met.



Impact on Student Success:



Connect with AES

For more information on the NG Fund, please contact the Niigaan Gdizhaami Fund Coordinator, Tammy Desmoulin at ngfund@a-e-s.ca

ANISHINABEK
EDUCATION SYSTEM