

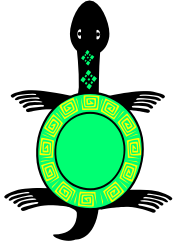
The Northwest Catholic District School Board

Elder Protocol For Schools



**The Northwest Catholic
District School Board**
S C H O O L S O F H O P E

February 2013

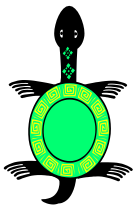


“Strong cultural values, First Nations identity in students, and mainstream academic and technical education are not incompatible or contradictory, but in fact the former enhances one’s capacity to deal with and master the latter. With a solid grounding in one’s own culture and positive identity, students become much higher achievers in all areas of education and life.” - Assembly of First Nations - 1988

Rationale:

The Northwest Catholic District School Board is committed to the success of all students. Inviting Aboriginal role models, like Elders, into our schools is an opportunity for sharing of cultural beliefs and traditional practices with students and staff in our schools. Inclusion of an Aboriginal perspective will ensure our Aboriginal students are supported, encouraged and challenged to own their learning and to reflect on what they learn through traditional learning opportunities. Teaching from an Aboriginal perspective will help foster Aboriginal student self-esteem and confidence.

This Elder Protocol is to serve as a guide and ensure consistent practice when working with an Elder. Elders are also known as Cultural/Traditional Teacher. This guide will provide key points to consider when working with an Elder from the community.



Why Involve Elders?

First Nation Elders are integral to the revival, maintenance and preservation of Aboriginal Culture. Elder participation in support of curricular objectives helps to support the development of positive identity of First Nation societies.

Identifying an Elder

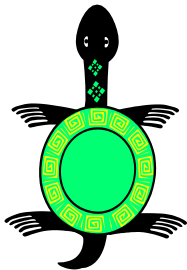
“Who is an Elder?” is one of the first questions to arise when a school begins to discuss bringing Aboriginal Elders into the school. As the following explanation outlines, a person becomes an Elder in the eyes of his or her community by developing knowledge of life and traditional ways. It is also important to appreciate the spiritual significance within traditional Aboriginal culture of the Creator granting the power to fulfill the role of the Elder.

Who is an Elder?

It is impossible, and perhaps even disrespectful, to try to define Elders in the precise empirical terms commonly used by our larger European-based society. However, there are some generally agreed upon criteria that are accepted. They include:

The Elder is recognized and respected by his/her own family and community for such attributes as having knowledge that is accompanied by wisdom, kindness and appropriate moral behaviour; an Elder has earned his/her knowledge through years of struggle and sacrifice and his/her authority comes from the spirit; an Elder has patience, caution, humility and kindness; an Elder usually is a person who is fulfilling the role of a grandparent; an Elder is usually fluent in his/her first language; Elders are seen to have very special and unique gifts and abilities.

Elders are certainly not all the same. Aside from the obvious difference that arise from the fact that each Aboriginal nation and community may have unique aspects of Eldership, it must be kept in mind that each Elder is a “specialist” in one or more areas (e.g., traditional sacred ceremonies, legends, spiritual well-being, healing process, oral history, etc.). The identification of Elders is a very sensitive and complex issue. Strategies to determine who the Elders are in a community must be chosen with delicacy to ensure only those people recognized and respected by his/her own family and community is called upon. This will minimize the risk of offence and error. It is advisable for “the novice” to seek the assistance of a knowledgeable intermediary in order to approach and invite the services of an Elder. The intermediary could be identified through connection with local First Nations Education counselors.



When Approaching an Elder

This should always be done at least a minimum of one week prior to the event to allow the Elder opportunity to reflect and pray about the event.

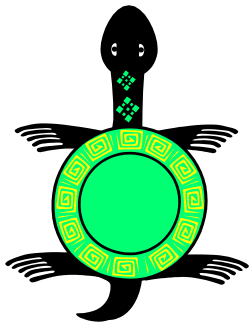
Once you have acquired the Elder’s contact information, and what special gifts he/she has to share, please provide the following information when speaking to them:

- introduce yourself
- tell them where you obtained the referral from (i.e. Friendship Centre, Education Counselor)
- your reason for asking to meet
- your interest in meeting them further to discuss your request at their convenience, gifts/talents and availability.

Some Elders prefer personal visits. To establish a relationship and clarity of the purpose of the visit, meet with them before they visit your school. Some Elders may be okay discussing your request over the phone but usually this practice occurs only after a relationship has been established and when there is understanding between both parties. It is important to be patient when asking for an Elder to support your request as they may not provide you with an answer immediately. An Elder may wish to think about the request before committing to it.

If an Elder is unable to accommodate your request, he/she may provide a name of another Elder that may be able to help.

Ask the Elder if transportation arrangements are required. In most cases, transportation arrangements may not be necessary but in some instances you may have to arrange travel to and from the school.



Elder Protocol:

Prior to an Elder sharing knowledge, it is essential that you or your students complete the cycle of giving and receiving through an appropriate offering. This offering represents respect and appreciations for knowledge shared by an Elder. One must ascertain the nature of the offering prior to an Elder's visit as traditions differ throughout Aboriginal communities. In addition, should your school or district normally offer honoraria and/or expense reimbursement to visiting instructors, it would be similarly appropriate to extend such considerations to a visiting Elder.

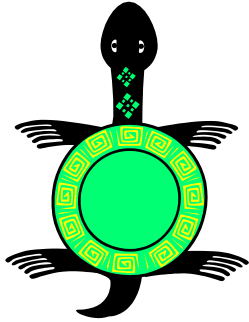
First Nation Elders often have helpers who work with them and receive training. Ask the helper how to approach a particular Elder since each Nation has its own tradition. Always use respect, ask permission, seek clarification if there is something you do not understand and follow the direction you are given.

If you would like an Elder to do an opening and closing ceremony for an event, you need to explain the event to the Elder. Offer tobacco to the Elder and invite them to participate. Acceptance of the tobacco means acceptance of the invitation. An opening and closing observance must be completed. The opening observance gives thanks to the Creator and serves to bless the event.

The Elder may ask a helper to smudge the people gathered. Smudging is when a medicine such as sage is burned so that it is smoldering. This smudge is then taken around the circle and a feather is usually used to spread that smoke around all those gathered. Smudging is done to cleanse everyone gathered so that

the event runs smoothly and everyone is in a good frame of mind. It is important to note that not every Elder smudges. To find out the Elder process or when in doubt, seek clarification and ask questions. If there is something you do not understand, follow the direction you are given.

Note: Check your school's policy on smudging activities prior to approaching the Elder.



Cultural Practices: Offering Medicines (Tobacco):

When making requests to an Elder, and if he/she accepts your request, ensure you have tobacco at hand. It is important that tobacco is given first at the initial meeting after the request is accepted or prior to the session or event.

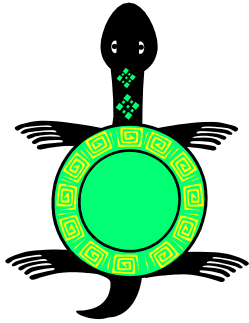
Offer the tobacco with your left hand, which signifies giving from the heart, respect and commitment. The Elder accepting your request will offer the tobacco in prayer on his/her own time for good positive outcomes and guidance.

It is important to note that not all Elders practice traditional ceremonies, and it is okay to ask this question, e.g., "Are you a traditional Elder? Will you accept this tobacco as a sign of commitment to my request?"

If you are presenting the tobacco in a tie it is important that you use the appropriate colour. You may find this information by approaching your local communities Education Office or Tribal Council Office. The local Reserves' Band Council may also provide you with the necessary information.

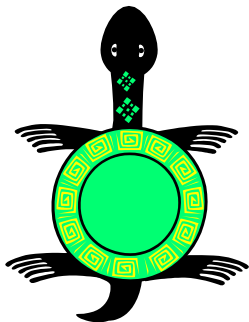
When making requests to Elders, practicing cultural protocol will be acknowledged and appreciated. If you are making a request for a drum group, a pouch of tobacco (pipe tobacco) would be offered versus a tobacco tie. As well, if you find out the Elder is a sacred pipe carrier, offer pipe tobacco instead of commercial tobacco. You can ask the Elder first.

If your request is not accepted do not offer tobacco but give thanks to the Elder for their time.

**Other Considerations:**

Here are some other points to consider when working with an Elder:

- Find out if the Elder will be bringing a helper. If so, it would be appropriate to give a gift (or card) to the helper as well.
- As a reminder, a phone call to the Elder should be made at least a few days ahead of the event.
- It is important to ensure your staff is aware of community visitors coming to your school.
- It is recommended to arrange a student or staff member to greet the Elder at the front door or other pre-arranged location and escort him/her to the appropriate destination.

**Honourarium/Gifts:**

The purpose of honourariums and gifts is to acknowledge and show appreciation for the sharing of knowledge and respect for personal time given. Traditionally food, clothing, medicines, etc. would have been used to gift the Elder. Today, these items and/or monetary honourarium may be given as a demonstration of respect and appreciation. The practice of giving is culturally appropriate and is implemented through many agencies in the region. An Elder does not have the expectation to receive the honourarium, but appreciates the gesture of what is given. Giving from the heart is what counts. Not all Elders may accept the gift and may voluntarily give their time.

Finally: If you are unsure of something it is appropriate to ask.