

UAED Network
Background Brief

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Chalo School – An Example of Innovative Aboriginal Education

“Exceptional leadership, coupled with Fort Nelson First Nation's vision for a Strong, Healthy, Proud, and Self-reliant community, guides our exemplary school” (Chalo School website).

Fort Nelson First Nation’s (FNFN) mission statement is reflected in Chalo School’s mission. The school was established in 1982 by FNFN, who owns and operates it. As an independent school in the Province of British Columbia, Chalo School follows the prescribed curriculum of the Ministry of Education and has been accredited by the Ministry in 1993 and 2000 and by the First Nations Education Steering Committee in 2004.

The school has been recognized for its exceptional performance, high education standards, and innovative approach to Aboriginal education. In 2003/2004, it was “recognized as one of ten exemplary schools for Aboriginal education in Western Canada and the Yukon. In 2006, Chalo School was recognized in the House of Commons as a role model for B.C. and for the country” (Chalo School website).

Chalo School Facilities and Governance

“The Chalo School started as a one room primary school housed in a portable classroom. A new school structure was completed in 1996 with a library, computer lab, classrooms, gym, and meeting areas” (Markey et al. forthcoming, p.317). Over years, the school gradually increased its student population and added elementary and secondary grades. Today, Chalo School features a student population of approximately two hundred, ranging from pre-school to grade twelve. Recently, the school opened a new four million dollar high school facility, including a cultural arts program and culinary arts spaces.

Sixteen teachers and eleven support staff carry out the daily operations and education. The FNFN Community Education Authority (CEA) governs FNFN education and oversees Chalo School operations on a strategic level. At public bi-weekly meetings, the five-member CEA discusses educational policy and issues (Chalo School website). Markey et al. comment that the CEA “serves as a critical link between the school and the community. There is a transparency to all decision making that reinforces and affirms this community ownership and support”

(forthcoming, p.317). As part of the community involvement, Chalo School invites parents to form a Parent Advisory Council. Although currently inactive, it provides an opportunity for parents to meet with the Principal, the CEA, and school staff and to provide input in curriculum and activity planning as well as problem solutions.

The main emphasis of the curriculum is on reading, language, and mathematical skills; however, cultural traditions and understandings as well as Aboriginal languages are fully incorporated and play significant roles in the curriculum. FNFN community members fill the roles of culture and language teachers and educational assistants. They “employ a medicine wheel model representing the wholeness of life and organize instruction around spiritual, emotional, physical, and intellectual understandings” (Spencer quoted in Markey et al. forthcoming, p.317).

Referencing Spencer, Market et al. identify Chalo School’s teacher selection practices as an important aspect of the school’s success. Relationship-building and commitment to the community are some of the main selection criteria. The BC certified teachers expect their students to work hard and excel while providing a personalized, accepting, and welcoming learning environment. Long tenures and high levels of staff satisfaction are reported to contribute to the positive and productive learning environment, which is flexibly adjusted to students with special learning needs.

Chalo School is committed to regular performance assessments. The First Nations School Association conducted an assessment for the school year of 2008-2009. The First Nations schools assessment process is “intended to enable First Nations schools to undertake a meaningful review of their operations, including their challenges and successes, in order to continually work toward school improvement” (FNSA 2009, p.1).

A School Growth Plan for 2009-2010, which is an element of the assessment, guides some of the staff and school development activities for the school year. Objectives include increased integration of FNFN content into teaching materials, furthering student progress in computer technology-related skills and knowledge, and development of additional fine arts components of the curriculum.

Chalo School as an Example: Approaches and Lessons

FNFN reports 638 members (FNFN website) and is located in northeastern British Columbia, close to Fort Nelson (which has a population of approximately 4,500). FNFN lands comprise ten reserves featuring tourism, wildlife, forestry, and oil and gas assets (Markey et al. forthcoming). Regardless of the situation of other Aboriginal communities – urban or rural, large or small, resource rich or poor – Markey et al. remark upon the role of the Chalo School as an innovative and successful capacity-building tool in the process of community development, which may serve as a role model for Aboriginal education initiatives in various settings.

One of the lessons to be learned from this example is related to governance and leadership. Again referencing Spencer, Markey et al. elaborate: “The school has grown and prospered as a result of strong governance and leadership. Key leadership is provided by a Principal who was also a long-time Chalo School teacher. With a focus upon effective communication between teachers and parents, and between the school and the community, the Principal has supported a school environment marked by caring and mutual respect. In turn, this has created a climate of trust and commitment where teachers, students, families, and the community are working together towards academic success” (forthcoming, p. 317).

Chalo School addresses colonization and assimilation trauma in the community by strengthening the young generation through education, identity formation, and healing for a productive, sustainable, and healthy future. A lot of the tools for this work originate in traditional practices, such as the Morning Circle (see FNSA 2009; Markey et al. forthcoming). Its significance as a reminder and daily application of culture and values and as a unifying community exercise demonstrates one way of integrating cultural practices into the everyday operations of a First Nations school.

At the same time, Chalo School emphasizes academic achievement: “The quality of the educational environment attracts [non-FNFN] students to the school. Student achievement, as tracked by the Canadian Test of Basic Skills and the BC Foundational Skills Assessment show that [Chalo School] has far fewer students ‘not meeting expectations’ than Aboriginal students across the BC school system” (Spencer quoted in Markey et al. forthcoming, p.318). This shows how culturally sensitive school operations and teaching methods can lead to higher success rates among Aboriginal students while fostering pride and health among the youth. In a context of urban Aboriginal economic development, such pride, confidence, and high education standards are assets and basic prerequisites for sustainable socio-economic activity. As a lesson for urban Aboriginal communities, the teaching approach chosen by FNFN for Chalo School can be adapted to urban Aboriginal education, for example in choice schools or as Aboriginal program components in mainstream schools with an Aboriginal student population.

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Sources and Related Links

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