

Foundational Knowledge of First Nations, Métis and Inuit

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Once a week, the Lethbridge Herald publishes a column written by a superintendent of one of five school jurisdictions in the Lethbridge area. This week's column is authored by Chris Smeaton, Superintendent for Holy Spirit Catholic School Division and was published on April 19, 2017. CASS thanks the Lethbridge Herald for permission to post this article on our website.

In the coming months, new standards will be unveiled for teachers, as well as school and system leaders. The current *Teaching Quality Standard* came into effect in 1997 and, although it has served the education system well, it certainly requires an update. Principals have been governed by the *Principal Quality Practice* and superintendents have operated under the *CASS Practice Standards*. The new legislated quality standards will be described in terms of competencies and indicators and should further enhance the professional practice of all. All Alberta teachers and school and system leaders will be expected to meet their unique quality standard throughout their careers.

An area that has been added to all three standards is foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit people for the benefit of all students. Teachers will be required to develop and apply this foundational knowledge, principals will support the school community in acquiring and applying this knowledge, and superintendents will establish structures and provide necessary resources. A key understanding is that this foundational knowledge is for the benefit of all Alberta students. It is not localized to areas where a high population of indigenous people exist. Regardless of the numbers of self-identified First Nations, Métis or Inuit students, this is the common standard.

Canada celebrates its 150th anniversary this year and there is no better time to fundamentally shift our thinking and attitudes towards our aboriginal people. The treatment of our indigenous people has left a black mark on our Canadian history and unfortunately most of us have little knowledge about the origin of that treatment. Would any of us agree with our own children being forcibly removed from our homes? Would we accept having our language, culture, and traditions eliminated? Would we tolerate the prevalent attitude of former government officials like Duncan Campbell Scott, head of the Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 – 1932, when he suggested, “I want to get rid of the Indian problem.”

It is an ugly truth that should be no longer hidden from our students or simply glossed over. The new standards will provide our Alberta students with an opportunity to accurately reflect and demonstrate the strength and diversity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit people. Societal change can only occur through a true understanding of the historical, social, economic, and political implications of the treaties and agreements with First Nations, the legislation and agreements negotiated with Métis, and of residential schools and their legacy.

School systems have the task of ensuring we move in the right direction; toward reconciliation, truth and understanding. We can no longer accept lagging achievement results. It is time to raise the bar and close the gap. We must stop making excuses and start finding solutions to build capacity amongst our First Nations, Métis and Inuit students. Without confronting some of our brutal history, we will not achieve the societal change required to make Canada truly great and, as in most cases, it needs to start with education.