

Submission to the Anishinabek News-June 2009 Issue
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Education

If there is one area that can be agreed upon by both First Nations and the government is the need to improve First Nations content in the education system. One of the major challenges that are faced by policy makers, teachers and students is the lack of quality material to use in the classroom which will be effective. The majority of teachers are not of First Nation descent and frequently do not have a lot of exposure to the various First Nation cultures; unless they are teaching on a First Nation community. Many of those teachers find working there extremely positive, but after several years, they move away from the community to be with their own families or escape the isolation or remoteness that can often exist.

As a former high school teacher myself, I saw firsthand how First Nation students would struggle to adapt to their new environment. Often, they had attended school on their communities but were now being bused to larger high schools in the public education system. The rivalries were blatant, and though not true for all schools and all students, are representative of the majority. The First Nation students stuck with their friends from the community, and if you 'messed' with one, you messed with them all.

Some steps have been taken to incorporate First Nation curriculum into the general school system. This is necessary not just because of the current political climate in which we live but for the positive inclusion of the people who were absolutely fundamental in the shaping of Canada. A Native Studies class is now offered in some schools, but usually at those schools that already have a large First Nation population and enrollment is vastly First Nation. This course, while a step ahead, still does not meet the need of bringing First Nation content into every classroom to every student.

Part of the problem begins in the education of teachers themselves. Some teacher's colleges have courses on educating First Nations where students learn about the cultural differences that impact the lives of First Nation students and what it would be like to teach on a First Nations community. These courses are not, however, mandatory and most teachers find the extra time and expense during a frantic year too much to take on. Were this class mandatory, think of the difference it could make for the future teachers entering the public system when dealing with First Nation students and attempting to incorporate their culture into the teaching?

Immediate progress is in the hands of the grassroots people: teachers, community members and elders. An excellent example of this is the work of Sam George, brother of Dudley George who was shot while protesting for the return of his people's land at Ipperwash. Sam goes to schools and shares his brother's story with the students. He discusses how the family struggled to

get the Inquiry that answered so many questions about his death and how the recommendations will hopefully prevent future tragedies. Sam notes, "The most effective way to get the student's attention is to introduce them Dudley. To show them that he was a real person." If these people could form a working relationship to have events as simple as a guest speaker, major progress could be made on how First Nations history and culture is taught in the public system.