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Council of Elders a First for Alberta

The Edmonton Catholic School District has now formalized a process which has provided an important link with the Aboriginal community. For the past four years, a small group of Aboriginal Elders (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) have met with the Board of Trustees twice a year to give their input on how to help Aboriginal students succeed. They have assisted Trustees in developing a deeper cultural understanding of Aboriginals and worked with the Board on enriching the Aboriginal curriculum. Now this process has been formalized with the establishment of the Council of Elders, which is the first Council of its kind in Alberta.

“This Board has always been guided by the vision of instilling hope and social consciousness and strengthening relationships among home, school and parish,” said Board Chairperson Cindy Olsen. “It is crucial that the Aboriginal community have a voice on the education of their children. The Council of Elders will help us provide additional support and strategies for the success of our 2,555 Aboriginal students,” Olsen added.

The enhanced role of the Elders will include:

- On-going guidance to the Board of Trustees and support to staff and students,
- Advice to teachers, school-based administrators and staff to integrate First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) content and perspectives into the curriculum, the classroom and the school,
- Counsel and support for FNMI recruitment and staffing,
- Support for Aboriginal students and their families,
- Bring forward a report annually to a public Board meeting.

The Council of Elders will consist of up to 10 Elder members who will be chosen by the Aboriginal Community and an Elder Coordinator will oversee the Council. Members of the Council of Elders are: Betty Lafferty, an Elder who has worked with the District for over three years and has led the Council of Elders since its inception, Francis Alexis, Jerry Wood, Lewis Cardinal, Tony Arcand, Giselle Wood, Jeanette Lean and Father Jim Holland.

“The Elder Council will be guided by Pimatisiwin, which is Cree for ‘Way of Life,’” said Elder Betty Lafferty. “This mirrors the same Core Values of Edmonton Catholic Schools and together I believe we will nurture Aboriginal students and benefit future generations,” Lafferty went on to say.

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Statistics Canada also shows continued growth of Aboriginal students with 15% of school age children being FNMI by 2012. The Council of Elders has already held three meetings with the Board of Trustees this school year and will be meeting shortly to define procedures of the Council.