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The Spirit is Still Dancing: Joe Duquette High School

Joe Duquette High School in Saskatoon offers a spiritually based educational option for Aboriginal students who have found themselves unsuccessful in mainstream programs, or who are attracted to a school which is rooted in Aboriginal traditions. Joe Duquette has two goals: to provide a high quality secondary school experience for Native students, and to encourage the physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional growth of every student and staff member at the school.

*The **communities and schools** series was launched by the Caledon Institute of Social Policy with support from the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation. The case for education as a public good in Canada is compelling. Strong public schools and healthy communities that share responsibility for the well-being of youth are crucial to our country's future. Through stories and commentaries that link theory and practice, we hope to help inform citizens' understanding of education issues and engage them more deeply in their communities and schools.*

When community members began planning for the opening of an Aboriginal secondary school in the 1970s, they envisioned that native spirituality would be the wellspring for program design. Accordingly, the medicine wheel and the sacred circle were accepted as the keystone philosophies which would guide student development. By educating students about their Aboriginal heritage; by encouraging them to discover and develop their talents in the areas of dance, drama, music and art; and by providing regular opportunities to participate in healing ceremonies, Joe Duquette staff have established a community based on wholeness. The school's motto is "Making the Spirit Dance Within."

"What that motto means to me is that every day is a chance to learn to know myself better," says Principal Duane Favel. "It's a way of appreciating the importance of everyday events, not just for the students, but for everyone who comes in contact with our school."

Answering a need

Census projections forecast that by 2006, there will be 180,000 Indians and Métis in Saskatchewan; more than half will live in urban centres. Thirty years ago, long before Joe Duquette school became a reality, few school programs existed to help Canadian Aboriginal youth make the transition to an urban, white-dominated culture. Surveys conducted through the 1970s and 1980s found that the Aboriginal high school dropout rate stood at 90 percent. An influential 1972 report entitled “Indian Control of Indian Education”¹ detailed the cultural isolation of Aboriginal children in the existing education system and suggested a new course be set which would honour Aboriginal culture and history.

Many First Nations and Métis communities began to establish local control over education during the early 1970s. In the City of Saskatoon, the Saskatchewan Native Women’s Movement was founded in 1970 in response to local concerns over youth development and education issues. Vicki Wilson was the group’s first provincial coordinator. Throughout the decade, Vicki continued to speak out about the lack of programming for Aboriginal youth. Her tenacity and ability to inspire other Aboriginal groups and individuals to make their views known helped bring about the opening of Joe Duquette High School in the fall of 1980.

“It was an exciting period,” says Vicki. “Money was available for new ideas and people were committed to correcting past mistakes. Administrators were willing to take chances.”

Originally named the Saskatoon Native Survival School, the school’s mandate was to help students get their academic lives back on track so they could reenter mainstream high schools. It didn’t work out that way.

“Many of our students returned even more discouraged,” reports school council chairperson George Inkster. “Fitting into mainstream schools was no longer the goal. We wanted to provide a regular high school curriculum, and we knew we also needed to instill cultural values and pride. The students now see this place as a ‘regular’ high school, not as a place of brokenness and refuge.”

In 1989, the school got a name change. Joe Duquette was the first elder who worked with the school. He lived on the Mistawasis Reserve 100 km north of Saskatoon, and his work with students and staff helped influence the spiritual direction of the school. Joe died in 1988 and the school was named in his memory.

The student body

The reasons why Aboriginal youth drop out of high school are many and complex. Some have been hurt by students and teachers who ignore or ridicule their culture and traditions. Curriculum materials traditionally have been designed to suit the learning styles and cultural references of the mainstream groups. The students’ life histories often made high school completion next to impossible.

Says Duane: “Many of our students have been through a lot in terms of abuse, from psychological abuse to physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. A lot of the students who attend our school are hurting and confused and they’re not sure where they belong. We try to provide a safe, comfortable atmosphere for them. From there, we begin to work with the emotional and the spiritual side as we try to deal with the issues that are hurting them. Only then do we focus on academics, but academics for a student who is going through a lot of hurt are secondary.”

Most students come to Joe Duquette because they learn about it from a friend or family member who has attended. Duane reports: “Many live independently in Saskatoon, and just getting themselves out of bed and into our building is hard work. Without the support of family, it’s hard for many of our students to learn to care about their school work and to stay motivated.”

Operating principles

Initially, community members made an application to the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education to operate an independent high school for Aboriginal students. The Ministry was not interested in funding an experimental school of its own and it insisted that the new school operate under the direction of a school board. The Saskatoon Catholic School Board agreed to sponsor the undertaking. A three-party agreement was drawn up among the school council, the school board and the Ministry of Education. Joe Duquette is referred to as an associate school. The board also sponsors the Saskatoon French School as another associate school.

Maurice Fradette, Superintendent of Education, has been associated with Joe Duquette for five years and feels that the operating arrangements allow a good balance between control and autonomy. Says Maurice: “Joe Duquette operates under the jurisdiction of the Catholic board and its administrators. We oversee setting the school’s budget, selecting new staff and approving operations decisions and program delivery plans. Sometimes we differ in our approaches and viewpoints, so we sit down to work out strategies that are agreeable to all involved.”

Evolving responsibilities

Joe Duquette’s first school council developed 11 program goals which were aimed at strengthening the academic, social, spiritual and physical capabilities of every student. They sought to encourage a strong Indian identity, provide opportunities to earn educational credentials, and help students adopt community values and revere Indian culture. The Council also hoped to promote independence in the larger community. Parents, Aboriginal community members and Elder roles always have been included as integral educational elements.

Traditionally, every Aboriginal adult assumes responsibility for every child. Members of Joe Duquette’s school council are people who are concerned about education and who want to contribute to its maintenance and development.

One of 12 council members and its current chairperson, George Inkster, has been involved with the school since its opening. He left the city in 1991. When he returned three years later, members of the community asked him to come back to the council.

Says George: “We function as a body which is separate, but equal to, the Catholic board. Though there is a requirement that staff be practising Catholics, we are able to hire non-Catholic Aboriginal teachers and elders to teach the cultural components of our programs. We’ve also established the practice of hiring Native principals and vice-principals. In cases where we have no option but to appoint a non-Native to those positions, they are given one-year contracts.”

The school board uses its own procedures to set the school's operating budget, but the school council proposes spending priorities. The council's main role continues to be the 'keeper of the vision.' "That role is also the responsibility of everyone here," says Duane Favel. "We all play a part in making this school what it is. One of the best parts of working here is that no two days are alike. Every day, I get the opportunity to learn something new about myself, my students, my culture."

Academics

When the school opened in 1980, there were 64 students enrolled. In the 1999-2000 academic year, 235 students were in attendance. Joe Duquette offers a regular Grade 9 to 12 program for academically capable students. Those with weak skills are offered a Grade 9 upgrading program which focusses on literacy and math. Students can move into a similar program in Grade 10 if they are still not ready to join the regular academic program.

Once students reach their late teens, they either have moved into the academic stream or they have been encouraged to develop abilities which may result in an employable skill. Weak student or strong, all are involved in drama, music and dance. Says Duane: "Our Grade 9 upgrading class has between 12 and 15 students, and our Grade 10 has between 20 and 25. Many of these students excel in the arts activities which are at the centre of our school life. Academic success is important, but it's only part of a person's development."

The students are taught by a staff of 16, equally divided between Native and non-Native. Duane appreciates the commitment demonstrated by every staff member.

"I myself attended a Métis high school in northern Saskatchewan which had a very similar approach to Joe Duquette," says Duane. "The effect this type of schooling has is subtle, but tremendous. Almost unknowingly, people learn to reflect on their personal lifestyles and begin to make changes which help them achieve a better understanding of their lives and their place in the community. Over my 12 years here, I've seen a continuous evolution in what we do and how we do it. We make changes to suit our students' needs."

Building renewal

Every teacher knows that each school year brings its own challenges. In 1999-2000, students and staff had to accommodate a complete facility renovation. Ten new classrooms were added to the building, the administrative offices were remodelled and a regulation-sized gymnasium opened at the end of August 2000.

"Everyone had to make do with temporary quarters," reports Duane. "We learned to work around all of the construction, and we're now getting back to a more normal routine."

One of those routines is the breakfast program which serves between 25 and 30 students each day. The program originally was run by adult volunteers, but students have assumed full responsibility for its operation. Between four and five students come in early to prepare pancakes, muffins, coffee and juices each morning. Funds are taken out of the school's nutrition program budget to cover expenses.

There is no staff room at Joe Duquette. The cafeteria is the school's meeting place and everyone eats there together. Teachers share their mealtimes and their conversation with their stu-

dents. This feature clearly demonstrates the community values which have made the school a welcoming place.

Teaching others to dance

Each spring, staff at Joe Duquette plan for an educational conference which brings together educators from around the city to learn more about Native culture and spirituality, and to see schools as a place of sharing. The 2000 Awasis Conference brought together 1,100 people for two days to help others 'make the spirit dance' in their educational communities.

Says Duane: "It's an enormous task. Our four-person committee oversees all aspects of the conference, from booking the facility to preparing the spiritual and artistic components which are centrepieces of the conference. Everyone has an opportunity to share new ideas, and report on successes and failures. We come away feeling renewed and refreshed. Awasis is a Cree word that means 'child,' and we focus on serving our children better."

Partnerships

Saskatoon Native Theatre originated at the school in the late 1980s. By 1993, participation in the theatre group was offered as an extracurricular activity. Each year, students pick one or two topics from which to develop productions, and they send funding proposals to nonprofit organizations. The Saskatchewan Ministry of Health and the Saskatchewan Treaty Commission both have provided funds. Last year's production focussed on increasing public awareness about treaty issues. Called 'A Deal's a Deal,' it was performed to 15 Native and non-Native

audiences around the province. Fourteen student actors and three student technicians made up the crew, and funds were provided by the Saskatchewan Treaty Commission.

Partnerships help to extend the school's community into the wider world. Students who have difficulty attending school on a regular basis are guided by parents, social workers, case managers and school counsellors.

"Our students have to deal with many types of pressure," says Duane. "Most are not from solid homes and it's easy for people from low socioeconomic backgrounds to get sidetracked. We try to provide them with plenty of opportunities for making healthy choices. If a student comes to us who really excels in dancing and singing, we recognize that that's their interest and we show them how to participate at their level. The self-respect and self-confidence that comes from being involved in a well-received production gives them a stepping-stone from which they can move forward."

School graduates often return as teachers or school council members, or come to participate in dramatic and dance productions. Says Duane: "This is a place where everyone can experience personal growth on a regular basis. Individually, we decide if we want to participate and that kind of ownership and commitment makes for a sound community."

Mainstream acceptance

The situation for Aboriginal students in Saskatoon's mainstream schools has improved over the last decade. The cultural isolation that students experienced is gradually giving way to more culturally sensitive programming. Saskatoon's public system has designated sev-

eral elementary schools as community schools in order to pay particular attention to their Native populations, and one public high school offers specialized Aboriginal programming.

The Saskatoon Catholic School Board has opened two community elementary schools and is making plans for a third. An Indian and Métis education committee is developing a number of initiatives aimed at providing greater awareness of Aboriginal culture and issues.

“Twenty years ago, we were trying to patch up broken children,” says George Inkster. “Today, the students at Joe Duquette are proud of their school. They are learning about who they are and determining who they want to become. As a community, we are working to ensure that their cultural heritage is a centrally important part of their lives.”

Anne Makhoul

Anne Makhoul works on the ‘communities and schools’ series for the Caledon Institute of Social Policy.

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Reference

1. National Indian Brotherhood. (1973). “Indian Control of Indian Education.” Ottawa, September.

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