

Executive Summary

Kihtwam — *“Once Again”*

Student Retention and Re-Entry Program Research Study

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**Working in Partnership with the Kihtwam Committee,
comprised of personnel from the Educational Communities of:**

Beardy's and Okemasis Willow Cree First Nation
Mistawasis First Nation
Muskeg Lake Cree Nation
Prairie Spirit School Division

Background

Partnership

In 2004 a local partnership between the Beardy's and Okemasis Willow Cree First Nation, Mistawasis First Nation, Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and the Prairie Spirit School Division was formalized. The purpose of the Partnership was to help more children and youth learn and to improve the quality of the teaching in schools in all of these communities.

Members of the Partnership were brought together in teams to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals, share strategies and then create lessons to improve upon those levels. The professional learning communities that were formed are distinct in that they go across and throughout provincially and federally supported schools.

Kihtwam Program

Kihtwam means "once again" in Cree

The Partnership initiated the Kihtwam program, based in Partnership schools and including the communities of Leask and Duck Lake. Kihtwam is a student retention and re-entry program for disengaged youth, from ages 14 to 21. The goal of the program is to invite students to return to school and complete their formal education. Kihtwam, meaning "once again" in Cree, is an innovative education opportunity, with the following purposes:

- To encourage "leavers" to complete their education (Grades 10, 11, or 12, Adult 10, Adult 12, and/or GED)
- To "once again" invite youth back with alternate learning opportunities
- To connect student learning to the world of work & trades training
- To instill hope for the future for these youth

The Kihtwam program implements models to address retention programming, barriers to re-entry, improved transitions for students and a culturally sensitive youth engagement plan.

The program is active in several communities, with varying approaches. In one community, a teacher is dedicated to working only with students who have returned to complete their education. This teacher meets with students in their home communities and works with them individually to ensure their success. With this model, the teacher is active in the community and also recruits students to return to school.

The Kihtwam program also places a priority on assisting adults who wish to complete their education. Storefront programs —typically run in partnership with the local regional college—provide a flexible opportunity for working adults to find time to finish high school.

A student engagement team, with representatives from a majority of the communities, meets regularly for team-building activities and leadership development. In addition, the students provide feedback and input for the Kihtwam program. In this way, the program is guided by the students it is designed to assist.

Research Project

Purpose of Study

In 2007, a research study was commissioned by the Partnership to determine the successes of the Kihitwam Program to date and make future recommendations for the program. As well, the study was designed to identify the critical factors necessary for student engagement and satisfaction.

The Partnership received a research grant from the Office of the Federal Interlocutor (OFI) and Saskatchewan Ministry of Education. The defined purpose of the research project was to:

- Identify the critical factors necessary for student engagement and satisfaction
- Determine successes of Kihitwam Program
- Make future recommendations for Kihitwam Program

The research project involved the collection of a wide range of information regarding perceptions about education and work programs that meet the needs of youth and young adults. The study was to focus on student, family and community and business sector assessment.

Research participants

Participants in the research project were interviewed individually and/or participated in focus groups. Individuals who were involved in the study represented different educational categories - continuers, leavers, returnees and graduates. In total, 47 individuals participated in the study, which included 18 males and 29 females, aged 16 to 48.

The participants were also assessed in the following areas:

- Schools attended
- Education levels
- Home life
- Student strengths
- School programs
- Being prohibited from attending school
- Educational histories of families
- Other experiences affecting attitude toward education
- Positive school experiences
- Knowledge of educational requirements

Research Results

Critical factors for student engagement

Based on the wide range of information gathered, the research project identified 10 salient concepts that emerged as critical factors impacting student engagement and satisfaction (in random order):

1. Family
2. Personal Wellness
3. Transportation
4. Recreational Activities
5. Value of School
6. Role Models and Elders
7. Learning Environment
8. Cultural Components
9. Career and Post-Secondary Transitions
10. Financial Considerations

Successes of Kihlwam program

The data compiled by this research project demonstrates that the Kihlwam program provides improved outcomes for students. In addition, there is evidence that the program demonstrates to its funding agencies that it is an effective system response to the needs of the students in our communities. Kihlwam provides effective practices for the Partnership communities and may help inform effective practices for other school divisions or educational organizations. The specific benefits of the Kihlwam program include:

- Students are returning
- Program is a less threatening way to re-engage
- Students appreciate flexible time frame
- Students value one on one time and in small groups
- Partners are working together to share successes and future considerations

Future Recommendations Identified

In addition to the various benefits of a program like Kihlwam, study participants articulated areas for future improvement, which include:

- Family support mechanisms
- Improved understanding about the Kihlwam Program
- Counseling opportunities (i.e., support groups, help line)
- Conscious efforts to invite students back
- Recreational programs
- Career education & pre-employment strategies
- Work experience - apprenticeship opportunities including transportation
- Transition services to post secondary experiences (work or education)
- Daycare provisions
- Heritage & cultural education
- Financial planning & money management skills development

Next steps for Kihtwam

In conclusion, the Kihtwam program has been a successful initiative of the Partnership. The desired outcomes for the Kihtwam program and the indicators of success are realistic and will continue to be a driving force for the initiative. The Partnership will now need to examine the critical factors that have been identified for student engagement and satisfaction. As well, the Partnership will need to consider the future recommendations for the program and determine what areas will be targeted. The next steps for the Kihtwam program will include:

- Sharing information with Partners and Stakeholders
- Addressing critical factors for student engagement
- Determining immediate, short-term and long term goals
- Modeling learning

For further information, please contact:

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