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National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Fulford, George Taylor, 1954-

Sharing our success : more case studies in aboriginal schooling / George Fulford, principal author; Jackie Moore Daigle ... [et al.]; Helen Raham, editor.

(SAEE research series; 31; Sharing our Success series; 2)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-9737755-8-7

1. Native peoples—Education—Canada—Case studies. 2. Native children—Education—Canada—Case studies. I. Daigle, Jackie Moore II. Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education III. Title.IV. Series.

E96.2.B443 2007 371.829'97071 C2006-906973-5

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For additional copies of this report, please contact:

SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION (SAEE)

225 - 1889 Springfield Road, Kelowna, B.C. V1Y 5V5

Telephone (250) 717-1163

Fax (250) 717-1134

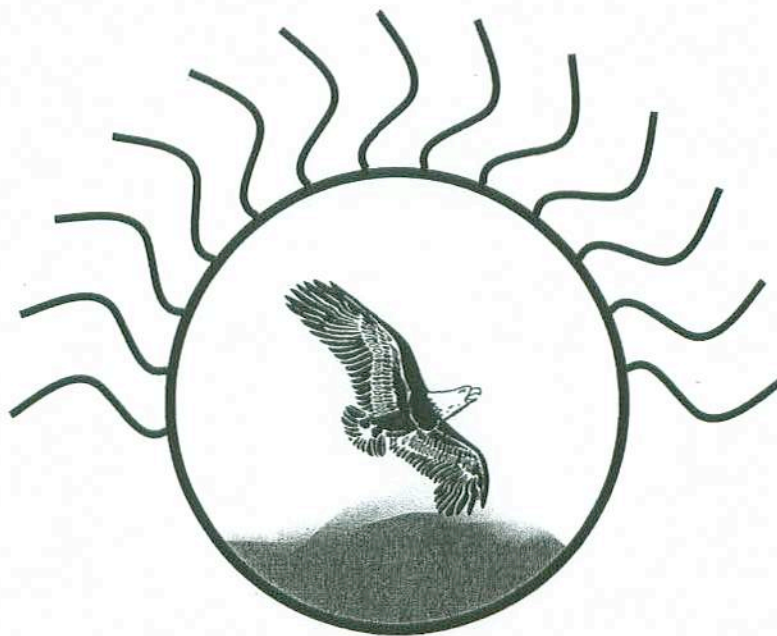
E-mail: info@sae.ca

Website <http://www.sae.ca>

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SOCIETY FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF Excellence in Education

8. N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre Alternative School

JACKIE MOORE DAIGLE

N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School is located in the heart of downtown Sudbury, Ontario. The largest city centre in northern Ontario, Sudbury is also known as the largest mining centre in Canada — “the home of the big nickel.” With a population exceeding 155,000, the city has a diverse mix of Irish, Scottish, Italian, German and Franco-Ontarians as well as a rapidly growing Aboriginal community.

The Aboriginal presence in Sudbury consists mainly of the Ojibwe people who moved to the city from the surrounding Aboriginal communities. There are approximately 20 reserve communities in the region within 30-300 km of the city's radius. Many of the Ojibwe people and other groups, like the Cree, make their new, temporary or permanent homes in Sudbury. Many others living in the area will travel to the city for shopping, recreation and other needs like medical attention.

Greater Sudbury is also known as the hub of higher learning in north-central Ontario. Laurentian University is located here, as well as the Cambrian College campus, College Boreal, and the more recently-established Northern Ontario School of Medicine. A number of Aboriginal youth will select these post-secondary institutions to pursue studies beyond Grade 12.

Many young adolescents move to Sudbury to pursue secondary and post-secondary education, some coming from as far away as the James Bay and the Hudson Bay regions. While a small number are able to make a successful transition to urban living, the majority find it very difficult to make the adjustment. Many at-risk youth who leave home at an early age to obtain their high school education drop out before completing Grade 12. Research shows that the most important attribute

contributing to Aboriginal student success in the mainstream system is the ability to manage in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds. This account is a case study of one Aboriginally-run institution that is making a difference in the lives of these individuals through the provision of an alternative secondary school support program.

The N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School is housed in the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre which administers 18 other programs for the Aboriginal population. The purpose of Native Friendship Centres which are located in numerous cities across Canada is to assist and provide support to Aboriginal people in urban settings. N'Swakamok is literally translated as "where the three roads meet" at the heart of Sudbury. First established in 1967, the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre is committed to information sharing, recreation, referral, and community development. The many services it provides include support for children and families, legal and social services, alcohol and substance abuse programs, and numerous sub-programs including adult literacy, employment and training, and youth programs. The N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre receives its core funding through the federal government under the Department of Canadian Heritage, with additional grants for various programs available from other ministries and government agencies. Among its many programs is the N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School.

N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School was selected for this study through the recommendation of the Ontario Ministry of Education. It is considered successful because of its highly individualized approach to learning and for its special support structures in a culturally inclusive environment.

History of the School

The N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School opened in February 1990. In the same year, the Alternative Secondary School Project initiated by the Ontario Ministry of Education opened two other locations in Ontario; the Fort Erie Native Friendship Centre, and the N'Amerind Friendship Centre in London. Each program operated in partnership with the local district board as a satellite school hosted by a Friendship Centre.

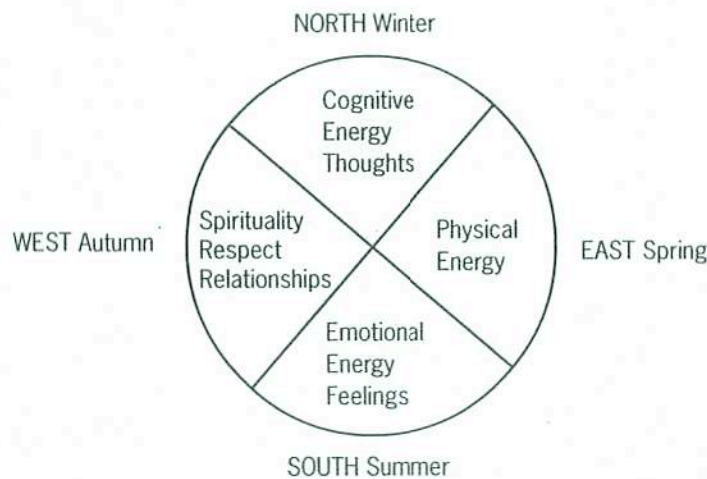
N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School is a joint effort between the Ministry of Education, N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre, and the Rainbow District School Board. It is supported through annual funding from the Ministry of Education Aboriginal Education Policy Unit of \$50,000, which increased to \$81,125 in 2003.

The Alternative Secondary School in Sudbury closed shortly after opening in 1990, due to circumstances that were unanticipated prior to its inauguration. The barriers experienced in the start-up phase generally related to the absence of support structures for the students. For example, some students were not able to attend independent study classes on a consistent basis due to lack of child-care and transportation services. After a thoughtful evaluation of the problems, the school re-opened in February of 1991. The current program is now located on the third floor of the

Centre with two classroom spaces, a computer room, an office and a board meeting room that is shared with other programs in the building.

In an environment fostering a strong Aboriginal perspective, individuals attending the N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School are provided with the opportunity to succeed in achieving their Grade 12 diplomas. After a bleak start in mainstream society, students reap positive results in this environment and graduate with increased motivation to join the workforce in a chosen career or pursue post-secondary schooling. The cultural approaches at the Native Friendship Centre spring from the belief that youth who are solidly grounded in their Aboriginal identity and cultural knowledge will gain strong personal skills to develop intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually. In the Aboriginal world, these four attributes cannot be fragmented one from the other — all are needed in order to succeed in healthy holistic living.

Figure 8.1 Medicine Wheel



The N'Swakamok Centre offers a unique kind of educational experience. Unlike a regular school, it is geared for Aboriginal youth and young adults who were unable to succeed in mainstream schools. Some of the obstacles they experienced included isolation, the lack of or little relevance in subject material, inconsistent attendance, and lack of support.¹ Many of these young drop-outs had no place to turn. The rationale for sponsoring such a program at the Native Friendship Centres was to provide a more community-based environment, more culturally appropriate and relevant curriculum, and access to cultural resources as well as additional supports offered at centres like this one.

The N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School is “built on the principles of adult education, native culture, and community development”.² Another feature of the learning philosophy is the

¹ See for example, Mackay & Miles (1989), an in-depth study of the experiences of Aboriginal adolescents in Ontario Secondary schools.

² School brochure

development of personal confidence and skills not only in the educational environment, but also for life-long skill development. These aspects permeated all the discussions with participants at the centre. The holistic mission of the school is also stated on the school brochure:

The mission of the N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School is to create a comfortable, educational environment that is sensitive to the needs of Native students. All areas of life (emotional, intellectual, physical and spiritual) are addressed so that the student can become an active member in the community and obtain an Ontario Secondary School Diploma and integrate into the career world.

Students

The Alternative Program serves young adolescents and adults who have been out of school for at least one year or more. The program initially enrolled a broader spectrum of students aged from 16 to 40 years, but in recent years, the program has increasingly attracted a younger population in the 18 to mid-20 age range. On October 31, 2005, which is the provincial cut-off date for annual per-pupil funding allocations, there were 89 students registered at N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School. Of these, 36 were under 21 years of age and 53 students were older. In both age groups, females outnumbered male students by a 2:1 margin at the commencement of the school term, but by June 2006 the gender balance was close to equal in the younger cohort. Throughout the year, enrolment fluctuates from month to month.

Students admitted to the program must be of Aboriginal descent, whether they be status, non-status, Métis or Inuit. Non-Aboriginal applicants have been admitted when there were seats available if evidence of a prior relationship with Aboriginal people can be provided either through work or family ties. Some students have experienced troubled pasts due to family issues, substance abuse, or problems associated with early home leave and the absence of parental supervision and support. Most of these students moved to the city to attend secondary school and boarded in homes of families and unfamiliar environments. Many applicants are young parents and some are single parents, circumstances which may have contributed to the difficulty they experienced attending the mainstream system. As there is a severe shortage of daycare spaces in the city, these prospective students must often wait months to find the necessary childcare to allow them to attend the Alternative Secondary School.

When asked how they discovered the Alternative Program, most students indicated they found out primarily through "word of mouth" or referrals from other social and counselling agencies. N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School does not have an advertising or recruiting program due to limited resources. Despite the absence of funding for recruitment purposes, the Alternative Centre has a waiting list of applications. The wait list in September 2005 was 88 students. Contingent on the status of current enrolment and on the numbers completing the N'Swakamok Alternative Program, students may wait anywhere from three months to a year for admission. Students are admitted any time of the year. There are no rigid starting dates because of the highly independent nature of the program.

In some years there is a high turnover of students, whereas other years are more consistent in terms of retention. During the 2005/06 academic year, 25 students exited the program for various reasons: graduation (7), entering the workforce (4) or other causes (14). Some students take a temporary leave from the program for financial reasons which require them to take some time off from studies in order to earn an income. Every avenue is examined before a student resorts to a temporary leave, especially for those with young families to support. They take the temporary leave with the knowledge that when they return, they will have to be placed on a waiting list all over again. Individuals who decide to leave are not granted an automatic return to the program. Students consider this ramification carefully before making a decision to take a temporary leave.

The young people who apply to N'Swakamok have something in common, and that is an opportunity to succeed in school completion at the secondary level. Some will settle for immediate employment following completion of the Grade 12 diploma, while others aspire to attend post-secondary institutions at the college or university level. Whatever the end goal, their immediate objective is to complete the Grade 12 diploma, which will open doors to better jobs and careers in the future.

Another program offered through the Centre is the Adult Literacy Program, which applicants who may have been away from school for longer than a year are encouraged to take. Housed in the basement of the Friendship Centre, it is also open to other Aboriginals in the city. The Adult Literacy Centre works in partnership with the Alternative Program. When students attain Grade 9 literacy level, they are considered ready to take the Alternative Program and to work toward a Grade 12 diploma. Applicants away from school for a longer period of time are expected to take a diagnostic test to determine their literacy level and if they will need to take the literacy program.

Figure 8.2 Roles and Responsibilities of Students

Student Roles and Responsibilities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Attend school twenty hours per week. Record time of arrival and departure each day in record book in office and calculate total hours each day. o Complete two lessons per week every week -- this will be monitored. o Make a plan as to how you wish to progress in each course and stick to it. o Provide your own school supplies (papers, pens, calculators etc.). o Participate in school meetings every Wednesday at 10:30 a.m. o Participate in school activities such as daily jobs, physical fitness, cultural events, lunch preparation, fund-raising, etc. o Complete two journals every month and hand them in. o Be courteous and helpful to other students; respect their space. o Drug and alcohol use will not be tolerated under any circumstances. o Smoking is to be done outside the building. o This school is run for our students; please contribute both by word and deed. The more effort everyone puts into the school, the better it will be. 	<p>I UNDERSTAND AND AGREE TO THE ABOVE TERMS. I ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FAILURE TO FOLLOW THE ABOVE TERMS WILL RESULT IN A SUSPENSION AND/OR WITHDRAWAL FROM THE ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL.</p> <p>Student Signature: _____</p>

Following admission to the Alternative Program, participants are required to sign a contract. Figure 8.2 provides a sample of the contract which all students must sign upon admission. The contract demonstrates that a full commitment to the program must be made on the part of the student, and that high expectations are demanded of all participants.

GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

Organizationally, the principal of Sudbury Secondary School and the Program Leader of the N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School work with the Executive Director and Education Support Worker of the Friendship Centre to manage the Alternative Secondary School. The Program Leader and the Education Support Worker play a key role with the day to day and annual management plan of the Alternative Secondary School. The Executive Director of the Friendship Centre reports to the Ministry of Education on the status of the program.

The Rainbow District School Board covers a vast geographic area of more than 14,000 square kilometres in the surrounding area known as Rainbow country. With a total enrolment of 16,400 students, it is the largest school board in northern Ontario. It has 40 elementary schools and 9 secondary schools under its jurisdiction in the area spanning a region that covers Sudbury, Espanola and Manitoulin. There are nine Board trustees, including one who represents the eleven First Nations communities who have educational service agreements with the Board. These agreements affirm Rainbow District School Board's commitment to First Nation students and officially recognize the importance of the heritage and history of First Nations in communities served by the Board. The agreements also focus on success for First Nation students and articulate specific goals to improve academic achievement in literacy and numeracy.

The N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre has an elected Aboriginal Board of Directors which acts as the governing body in mandating and overseeing the short and long-term goals and direction of the programs at the N'Swakamok Friendship Centre. The Board of Directors meets on a monthly basis. There are nine Directors, including one youth that are elected on an annual basis by community membership. Three members are elected to serve for three years, and an additional three members are elected to serve for two years and the remaining three are elected for one-year appointments. The rationale for the interval year appointments is to ensure long-term governance continuity. The Board of Directors is highly supportive of the Alternative Secondary School, attending activities throughout the year and providing an annual scholarship of \$500.00 for the top graduate each year.

The N'Swakamok Alternative program is guided by an excellent operational structure at the grass roots level. Since its initiation, the relationship between the Friendship Centre Alternative Secondary School program and Sudbury Secondary School has lacked an overly formal structure. The primary communication occurs between the principal of the Sudbury Secondary School, the Executive Director of the N'Swakamok Friendship Centre and the Program Leader. The principal of Sudbury

Secondary School is responsible for staffing the Alternative Secondary School, program planning, supervision of its professional staff, and coordination of auxiliary student services available through Sudbury Secondary School. If concerns or requests regarding the Rainbow District School Board's role in the partnership arise, the principal brings this information to the Superintendent responsible for the program for discussion or approval. In recent years, additional programs have opened in five other parts of the province where a formal Memorandum of Understanding is developed and signed between the Board of Education and the hosting Native Friendship Centre. It is understood that the N'Swakamok and the Rainbow District School Board will also draw up a formal agreement articulating the various roles and responsibilities through a Memorandum of Understanding in the near future.

N'Swakamok is required to submit a Program Review and Progress Report and a Financial Report in consultation with the School Board. The reports are submitted twice annually to the Aboriginal Education Policy Unit, Ontario Ministry of Education in December and fifteen days following the end of the school calendar year.

The Ontario Ministry of Education's review of Alternative Secondary Programs within Friendship Centres provides an opportunity to:

- confirm the status of the partnership;
- comment on the partnership as detailed in the implementation guidelines;
- review progress of the program;
- inform internal discussion on the Alternative Secondary School initiative; and,
- address financial accountability requirements for funding provided directly by the Ministry to Friendship Centres.

In addition to these reports, two meetings must be held each year involving representatives of the Friendship Centre, the partnering Rainbow District School Board, and the Ministry of Education Regional Education Office. The meetings include a visit to the Alternative Secondary School Program. The purpose of these meetings is to provide an opportunity for dialogue among partners to further the progress of the Alternative Secondary School Program. A record of these meetings is to be completed by the Education Officer and forwarded to the Aboriginal Education Policy Units with copies provided to the Friendship Centre and District School Board.³

The Alternative Program is funded through a partnership arrangement. The grant monies from the Ministry of Education are flowed to the N'Swakamok Friendship Centre to cover the salaries of the Education Support Worker and the Clerical Support Worker. The Rainbow School District Board provides the salaries of the three teachers seconded to the Alternative Secondary School. The N'Swakamok Friendship Centre provides the space and the upkeep of the program. Computers are donated from various business agencies or used computers are brought in from Sudbury Secondary partnering school. The Program Leader is also provided between \$3,000 – \$5,000

³ N'Swakamok Program Review Report, 2005.

annually from the operating budget of Sudbury Secondary School for supplies and office equipment. The school relies on fundraising activities to supplement its operating costs, generating between \$1,000 and \$1,500 annually through such efforts.

Program Leader and Staff

The staff is comprised of three full-time teachers and an Aboriginal Counsellor and full-time clerical support. Currently, the Program Leader serves both as the head of the N'Swakamok program as well as a teacher. She is a joint leader with the Education Support Worker. The Program Leader is accountable for the academic requirements of the program and reports to the principal of Sudbury Secondary School. The Education Support Worker is accountable for the administrative part of the program and reports to the Executive Director of the Friendship Centre.

The Program Leader, who is non-Aboriginal, was seconded to the Friendship Centre from a teaching position at another school in a nearby community. She continues to receive her salary through the Rainbow District School Board.

The Education Support Worker works closely with the Program Leader. She is largely considered an administrator of the program as well as a guidance counsellor for students. She is Aboriginal, and takes primary responsibility for examining each applicant's background and gathering the appropriate information necessary for admissions. The Education Support Worker examines the workload of each teacher and consults with them before adding a student to their roster. She is visible and accessible to the students and informs teachers whenever any problems arise. In addition, she ensures smooth co-ordination of activities and is the link between all stakeholders, including the other heads of staff within the Friendship Centre, community and other organizations within the Sudbury region.

The principal at Sudbury Secondary School selects the teachers assigned to N'Swakamok in consultation with the Program Leader and one Director representing the Friendship Centre Board. Potential teachers require the ability to work with adolescents in the N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School context. Seconded from the Rainbow District School Board, they continue to receive their salary from the Board. Of the three current teachers, one is of Aboriginal descent.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

The fundamental partnership sustaining the school is the previously described three-way collaboration between the hosting Native Friendship Centre, the school district and the provincial government.

As all of the students admitted to the program are eighteen years and over, there is minimal involvement of parents, many of whom live away from the city in their home communities. The

students are self-motivated to obtain an education. On-going support and encouragement is provided from the community and services at N'Swakamok Friendship Centre and from the Alternative Secondary School staff.

N'Swakamok Native Alternative Secondary School is well-known in the city, mainly owing to the efforts of the students who commit considerable time to fund-raising to support extra-curricular activities. The "Indian Tacos" which the students deliver to offices across the city during fund-raising days are famous in downtown business circles. The students also enjoy a good turnout for their car washes, bazaar and spring barbeque. With such undertakings, connections to the business communities are bridged and partnerships often result in future opportunities for co-op placements.

Links and relationship-building in a community context is a prominent feature of N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School. Students are exposed to the development of community resources with fund-raising activities, recreational activities and the planning of specific events related to special holidays and other milestones. The school staff promotes opportunities for such student-led projects. The school produces regular newsletters which raise its profile in the community, recognize student achievements and feature student writing.

The school also enjoys a partnership with St. Albert Learning Centre which provides access to a Native Literacy Coordinator. Health and Welfare Canada funds health related activities to promote healthier lifestyles and choices for students. A number of community donors have established scholarship funds for graduating students.

SCHOOL CLIMATE

One feels a sense of community upon entering N'Swakamok Friendship Centre. Visitors are greeted warmly as they arrive. There is a continuous flow of people seeking various services and programs available at the Centre. Although the city is spread out, the Aboriginal population *here* all seem to know one another and the Friendship Centre serves as a base for making those vital community connections. The climate is both formal and informal as staff and visitors are immersed with the business of the day. The Centre space is filled to capacity, almost too small for the heavy traffic of drop-ins and people attending programs. It has three floors as well as a basement level which is utilized for the Adult Literacy Program. The building is clean and the occupants take pride in keeping it that way, with several signs posted requesting visitors to assist in maintaining the cleanliness of the building.

The third floor is quieter, away from the flurry of activities downstairs. This is where the Alternative Secondary School is accommodated. One can glimpse several students working in the computer room and others are working in the larger room near the office area at the back of the building. Some are receiving one-on-one tutoring in the Boardroom. Throughout the week, students come in and out. Some stay for the whole day while others stay for a few hours, but all are focused in

their independent modules. The routines are clear and the setting is that of an adult learning environment.

Responsibility for the lunch program rests solely on the students, with little staff supervision. They prepare the weekly volunteer schedule every month. When lunch is ready, students in attendance congregate in the common room to share the meal. After cleaning the lunch dishes, they return to their independent work tasks.

The school gives students opportunities to experience success and strives to positively reinforce their accomplishments. On a monthly basis, students receive recognition for the most school hours attended, most lessons completed and most activity hours. The rewards and incentives used for this purpose include watches, school bags, agenda books, gift certificates and other donated items. Other student accomplishments and special occasions such as birthdays are celebrated by all. Graduation is the most important event of the year. At this time, all students who have completed credits are honoured, as well as those receiving their graduation diploma or certificate. Anishnawbe Special Awards are bestowed on those who have met certain criteria; eighteen students won these Aboriginal Awards in June 2006.

A special feature of the overall program at the Alternative Secondary School is its emphasis on personal empowerment. This is accomplished by utilizing a variety of methods combining cultural approaches, skill development, support programming and the inclusion of the recreational and sports programming to enhance physical wellness.

CURRICULUM AND PROGRAMS

The Alternative Secondary School is open between 8:30 am and 4:30 pm Monday to Friday, and follows the same calendar year as other provincial schools. One of the long-term *goals* of the school is to be able to offer evening programs for students unable to attend during the day due to employment or family situations, and to operate year-round to accommodate students expressing interest in attending school during the summer months. Both of these goals are presently unattainable due to fiscal constraints.

The school's curriculum complies with the secondary school guidelines offered under the Ontario government's Independent Learning Programs. The Centre offers a set number of core courses at the Applied, Academic, or Essential level.

Core Subjects

The courses that were available to students at the N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School during the 2005/06 academic year are listed in Figure 8.3.

Figure 8.3 Courses Available in the 2005/06 Academic Year

Courses Available in 2005-06	
Mathematics Grade 9 -- 12	Native Parenting Grade 12
English Grade 9 -- 12	Foods and Nutrition Grade 10
Native History Grade 10	Health for Life Grade 11
Canadian History Grade 10	Entrepreneurial Studies Grade 11
Philosophy Grade 12	Art Grade 9
Science Grade 9 -- 12	Civics
Computers Grade 11	Career Studies
Parenting Grade 11	Learning Strategies

Students wishing to take supplementary courses outside the core subject areas are able to register for these at the partnering Sudbury Secondary School, a short walking distance from the Friendship Centre. Here, N'Swakamok students may take Technology, Chemistry and Biology and other specialized courses of interest that require special supports like laboratories and lab material which cannot be accommodated at the Friendship Centre. In the same manner, students wishing to take welding or automotive courses may take them at Sudbury Secondary School where the specialized shops and equipment for such courses are available. Students have also taken the six-week computer course offered through night classes at Sudbury Secondary School. Additional support and tutoring for these courses is provided by the teachers at the Alternative Secondary School.

The services of a Native Youth Counsellor staffed by the Friendship Centre are also available to First Nation students attending Sudbury Secondary School. The priority of the Native Youth Counsellor is to be available to all Aboriginal students, to advocate on their behalf, encourage their involvement with school activities, and remain in contact to ensure their needs are being met within the school system. This added support is provided with the goal of assisting First Nation students towards successful completion of all requirements for a graduation diploma. The Native Youth Counsellor works closely with the Program Leader and the Education Support Worker to support individuals who may be attending other courses and programs in conjunction with both schools in overseeing any needs that arise while they are attending the larger institution.

Co-operative Education Placements

Students also earn credits through co-operative education placements, a program managed by the Co-operative Program teacher seconded from Sudbury Secondary School. Students may earn up to four cooperative program credits in a school year, with each credit requiring completion of up to one hundred and ten hours in a placement. Placements vary and include opportunities for work experience in libraries, shops, restaurants, gas stations, daycares, and business offices. The employers involved provide written evaluations at the mid-point and conclusion of the work placement, and students write a journal report of their experiences and lessons learned. Such placements often lead to future summer or part-time employment for students. Two-day job-shadowing opportunities are also available to students through this program. These are beneficial

in helping students choose career paths, which in turn, influences their choice of courses at N'Swakamok and provides added motivation to complete their studies.

Special Needs Support

Many of our students have a learning challenge. It takes them longer to go through the course material because of various difficulties experienced in their earlier schooling. The skills gap may be related to a learning challenge or a second language acquisition problem. *(Education Support Worker)*

Students in need of special attention in the area of learning are provided with support and professional assessments through the auspices of Ontario Works. The Education Support Worker felt they encountered a high incidence of learning disabled adolescents and adults which may account for their earlier struggles in the mainstream system. Some of the students slipped through the system with their learning disabilities undiagnosed. For such students, the completion of the program takes longer. It is the Support Worker's wish to have a new position created for a teacher who specializes in Special Education to better address these learning needs and gaps.

Other optional program services made available to the students through the Friendship Centre are: Nokiiwin Employment Services; Eshkiniigjig (Youth) Program; Healing and Wellness; Aboriginal Family Support; Pre-Natal; Family Court Worker services; Adult Court Worker; Aboriginal Children's Program; Homelessness Program; and Drug and Alcohol Program. When students are found to be in need of any of these services, they are encouraged to initiate contact. The staff concur that some of these services have provided the necessary additional supports to help keep some of the students in school.

Compulsory Weekly Meetings

As part of their signed contract upon admission, students are obliged to attend mandatory weekly meetings scheduled every Wednesday morning at 10:30 am. Students take turns chairing the meetings, taking meeting notes and extending invitations to special guests who may present information to the group. Special guests are wide and varied. Some presentations may relate to professional topics and other talks may relate to cultural and traditional knowledge. Meetings do not always involve guest speakers. The weekly meetings also serve as time to discuss concerns, issues, future plans and to celebrate recent successes.

Extra-curricular Activities

One really good thing about this school is that people are willing to share in activities outside of the specific subject area. We do a lot of things in the community. We golf, curl and hike, and fundraise. Teachers are not just behind a desk. You get more of a complete human experience rather than just a teacher-student experience. *(Teacher)*

Extra-curricular activities are many and varied. There are activities for every season. The students are responsible for the planning and preparation of these activities. Spouses and children are invited to the events which occur throughout the year.

Extra-curricular activities include field visits to special places like Science North, Imax Theatre (when the theme reflects the curriculum), as well as visits to various career fairs hosted by other organizations in the city. Sports and recreational activities include skating, curling, cross-country skiing, golfing, bowling and hiking in the local parks and outside the city. Organized sports include basketball, volleyball, floor hockey and soccer. April is dedicated to a Run/Walk month in which all students are encouraged to participate.

Each special holiday is celebrated and birthdays are celebrated as a group. A birthday cake is brought in once a month to celebrate all the birthdays for that particular month to show an appreciation for each student attending the program, some of whom may not otherwise celebrate a birthday if no other family member is living in the city.

Fund-raising activities help to augment some of the costs of extra-curricular activities, especially if there are additional costs involved beyond what the program can afford. Fund-raising activities include bazaars, barbeques, bake sales, Indian taco sales, raffles, fall/spring yard sales, and a car wash.

TEACHING AND LEARNING

The N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School is a highly unique educational environment. The expectations of students and staff are described in this section.

It takes a special kind of individual to teach and work in this program. Teachers and staff must have the capacity to understand the past experiences of their students. The Program Leader looks for particular characteristics in teachers applying to the school:

Teachers must be willing to take the time to listen to the genuine problems and concerns of these students. Teachers and staff must be approachable, flexible, friendly, respectful, and resourceful. They must be willing to go the extra mile for the students. (*Program Leader*)

Three staff are assigned to the N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School. One is the Program Leader who is responsible for overseeing the program and making any recommendations to the principal. This individual acts as the liaison between the Centre and the School. In addition to these responsibilities, this teacher is also responsible for the delivery of the co-op program, the civics and careers, learning strategies, geography, aboriginal issues and the family studies curriculum. The two other teachers are responsible for the delivery of the math, science and physical education curriculum as well as the English, philosophy and law curriculum respectively.

Alternative Secondary School teachers are subject to all provincial regulations regarding the Teacher Performance Appraisal Process, and the development of Annual Learning Plans. They participate in all professional development offered by the Rainbow District as well as take part in provincially sponsored in-service sessions for Alternative Secondary Schools within Friendship Centres. They are also alert to professional development opportunities available through the Native community.

Instructional Approaches

Because students are on individualized programs, large group instruction is rare in this setting unless it is geared to applying generic strategies in a specific subject area. For example, problematic mathematics concepts are covered in a group instructional setting once a week, and there is a weekly class in essay and poetry writing.

The school's program primarily consists of highly individualized and independent learning modules geared to every level. The work in each subject area is organized in binders. Students work at their own pace and must be disciplined to apply continuous effort with little or no interruption during their scheduled time. The teaching staff is present each day to provide one-on-one instruction to various students. They may move from one area to the next or students will come to their work station. Each teacher has an area of expertise and students know who to go to when they are working in a Mathematics, History or English module. Although teachers are assigned to specific subjects areas, when one is absent, the remaining teachers are expected to cover this area and must have the capacity to become well-versed in all subject areas. One teacher noted that coming to this program has been a special learning experience. Not only are the students at different levels in various subjects, they also bring with them differing learning styles. As the months progress, teachers become familiar with each student's learning style and begin to apply different teaching and learning approaches which they may share during their own discussions.

■ The teachers want you to learn and they give you lots of examples until you get it. (*Student*)

By the time the students reach the end of a series of twenty lessons, they are usually equipped to pass the required test. In most cases, teachers do not allow a student to move on if the material is not understood fully. Hence, considerable time is spent in order to ensure the students' success with the learning modules, providing numerous opportunities to learn difficult concepts. Assignments for courses vary, with some courses requiring tests and exams while others include essays and papers. When students do not succeed in a module, they are given another opportunity to re-do the module and virtually all will succeed in their second attempt.

Recent changes in the Grade 9 and 10 Math curricula have been problematic for the math instructor, as these changes are not reflected in the independent learning modules used by the school for these courses. Efforts are underway to re-align the modules by working with the Math Department at Sudbury Secondary School.

Post-secondary students from the neighbouring university and college often come in to volunteer as tutors. Some of these students are former students of N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School. The students at N'Swakamok view these students as role-models which gives them added inspiration to achieve their goal towards the completion of a Grade 12 graduation diploma.

Learning Expectations

Students must be present and complete a minimum of twenty hours of academic work on a weekly basis. The hours are flexible and of their own choosing, with no required mandatory scheduling except for the weekly meeting and other group events. Students are required to complete a minimum of two lessons per week. There are ten lessons for half a credit, and twenty lessons for a full credit. During the 2005/06 school year, the number of credits "in progress" averaged 87 per month, with some students working on more than one course simultaneously.⁴

Not all students start with a 'clear slate'; some enter the program with earned credits from their previous schooling. Therefore, each individual is assessed according to their own situation. When students are unable to meet the twenty hour requirement because of constraints related to their personal lives, perhaps due to a birth, for example, they must make arrangements with the Education Support Worker to allow work to be completed at home.

Working in such a highly independent environment allows students to develop the skills of self-discipline. When students have a choice in how and what they learn, a level of intrinsic motivation may be instituted that grows over time. Studying becomes a self-directed task, with the knowledge that if they need any assistance, someone is readily available to provide support.

Developing this self-discipline is not without its challenges. The Program Leader notes that motivation is a problem, particularly for younger students. Students lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills find it difficult to complete their assignments independently. The lack of Aboriginal content in many courses presents another barrier, as some find the material boring or irrelevant.

At the beginning it was hard to remain focused on the work in front of me. It's more difficult to focus if the material is Greek to you, but when you begin to learn the material, it becomes easier. You have to keep up a certain pace. I find it harder when there is a break, and I have to re-focus and find my ground all over again. I find over time, I become more determined to get to the end. Whenever I complete a module I feel good. *(Student)*

The Alternative Secondary School is equipped with ten computers and since many of the students do not have their own personal computer at home, they rely on the access to computers at the Centre. An increasing number of students prefer to do their assignments with the use of the computer; therefore the computer lab room becomes a busy place on certain days. Space and access to computers can be a challenge when students decide to come in during the same hours.

4 N'Swakamok Alternative School Program Review and Progress Report. July 2006. p.10.

When this happens, students negotiate computer time allotments among themselves. They learn to work collaboratively and cooperatively with space and time.

NATIVE LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Ojibway can be heard through the hallways and offices of the building, giving an indication of how very much alive and important the Ojibway language still is in this region. It is not taught at the Alternative Secondary School as a core subject for course credit, however, but is offered at the Centre for the general Aboriginal population.

N'Swakamok Friendship Centre is well-known for the cultural programs it has established over the years. This is largely due to being an Aboriginally-run institution with an Aboriginal Board of Directors.

The cultural programs and approaches at the school are evidenced in the following elements:

- Elders are present in the building on a daily basis attending their own senior programs as a group, or leading student youth forums, attending meetings, honouring ceremonial circles, or conducting circle teachings.
- Culturally relevant resource material is integrated into the curriculum. One example given is the selection of novels by Aboriginal authors for use in the English curriculum. The staff are always looking for resource material that will be meaningful to their students.
- Culturally relevant workshop offerings include: Bannock Making, Youth Regalia Making Workshop; and Craft Making — Porcupine Quill Making, Baskets, etc.
- Cultural teaching are offered throughout the year, and students have access to sage or sweetgrass ceremonies at numerous events which they may attend. One regularly scheduled purification takes place each week at the opening of the student meeting. Sweat lodge ceremonies are organized by the Centre throughout the year and some students take part in these ceremonies.
- Field trips that relate to cultural knowledge include trips to such places as the petroglyph park located in Peterborough. Students also take part in the annual Pow-Wow events hosted by Laurentian University, Cambrian College and the Friendship Centre, and raise additional funds to attend the Pow-Wow held in Ottawa in May of each year.
- Feasts and celebrations are very common in Aboriginal culture. There are many different kinds of feasts associated with special times of the year. At N'Swakamok, the feasts that are celebrated include Feast of Feathers, Back to School Feast, Christmas Feast, Feasts associated

with Pow-Wows and the Winter Social. Other important celebrations noted in the student calendar include All Souls Day in November in honour of those that have passed away, and the Gathering of Bear Clans during the month of February.

The school integrates native curriculum into some credit courses to ensure the material has relevance to the students' lives. It has acquired a growing collection of Aboriginal novels and texts, although this library is not yet adequate. Aboriginal perspectives are incorporated into the English course through writing and novel studies.

ASSESSMENT

Students are assessed in two ways. Their academic progress is measured through the completion of courses, accomplished when students complete the required lessons, and pass the tests and final exam in order to earn a credit. Exams are assigned following completion of twenty lessons in Mathematics, Science, History and English. Those who have not mastered the material are given opportunities to re-learn before being assessed again.

The second way of measuring student success is less visible, but is considered equally important and a vital component of the school's mission. Most students entering the program come with low self-esteem, a lack of self-discipline, a lack of responsibility, a lack of self-respect and respect for others, poor social skills, inadequate communication skills and a sense of overall failure. Therefore, the staff monitors students' growth in efficacy and development of life skills as well.

Students are also required to complete the mandatory provincial Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. This requirement is supervised through the Sudbury Secondary School campus.

Students do not receive conventional report cards; instead, their progress is reviewed on a continual basis and course credit completions are recorded directly on their transcripts. Along with Sudbury Secondary, the Alternative Secondary School is piloting a new computerized program for tracking marks and transcripts, registration and attendance for the District. The new system has posed some challenges, particularly with respect to the lack of software flexibility to adjust to the different reporting requirements in the alternative program.

OUTCOMES

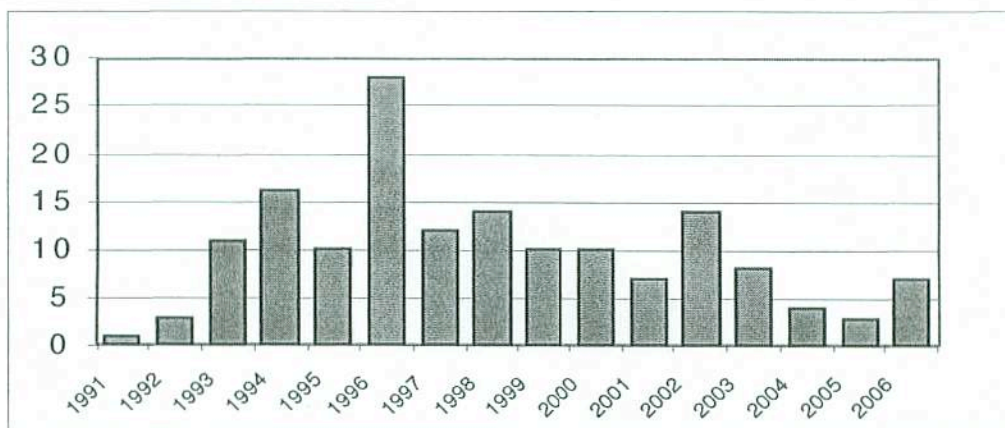
The school measures outcomes in a variety of ways. One important indicator is the number of students enrolled, students who might otherwise be on the streets. A waiting list of 88 students in September 2005 was reduced to 15 by the end of June 2006. The school is affording opportunities and support to those who had given up on obtaining high school graduation and the brighter future this opens up.

Success of the program is based on individual student successes. Students who have come to the program who have not attended school for a long time and who now attend on a regular basis are considered a success.

One outcome reported annually is student attainment of course credits towards graduation requirements. In the 2005/06 year, a total of 46 credits were completed by attending students.⁵

Since 1991, a total of 157 students have graduated successfully from the N'Swakamok Friendship Centre. Depending upon registration numbers and student pacing, the numbers have fluctuated widely from year to year. The annual graduation figures are shown in Figure 8.4. In 2006, seven students obtained their high school diplomas.

Figure 8.4 Number of Alternative Secondary School Graduates, 1991-2006



Comparison of graduation rates is difficult due to the changing criteria for graduation over time. Where up to 12 maturity credits were formerly granted based on age and experience, students must now graduate based upon course credit accumulation. The graduation rate has also been negatively affected by the implementation of the new curriculum, which students find more difficult to master. The statistics in Figure 8.4 also represent the intensifying challenges for the program in recent years as the proportion of younger students increases and entry level literacy skills decline. The school is exploring additional strategies to support the needs of this new demographic.

In terms of non-academic outcomes, both the Education Support Worker and the Program Leader expressed that by mid-year, most students experience positive changes and become much more competent and confident. Some may take longer, but the majority of students will walk away with a new-found sense of efficacy, feeling much better about themselves and their future. As well as academic skills, they learn many valuable social skills in parenting, communication, responsibility, respect, and how to work within a community of people.

⁵ N'Swakamok Alternative School Program Review and Progress Report, July 2006, p. 10.

A further outcome of note is that the innovative three-way partnership which created N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School is now being replicated elsewhere. Eight new Alternative Secondary School sites have been established around the province through partnership arrangements among other Friendship Centres, school districts and the province.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

The N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre Alternative Secondary School was founded on a shared commitment by the Friendship Centre and Rainbow District School Board to support at-risk Aboriginal students in developing their academic skills, and completing their high school education. Although the rates of success may not be readily apparent in statistical representations, the centre and the school staff easily identify their success in the stories of the individuals they work with. Students who although once disengaged from school have come back, who have persisted in their course work and, despite the odds against this, have advanced toward their educational goals.

The features that help to generate individual success stories are its ability to offer a culturally rich program and multiple supports, the unique partnership and committed leadership it enjoys, and the flexible schedule it offers the young adults entering this program.

Culturally Relevant Environment

First and foremost, the place makes a difference. The visible particulars of familiar surroundings, people and systems of thought connect the students in a comfortable learning environment. N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre is seen as a place that is familiar and brings a feeling of community in an urban landscape. All students make this attribute as their first choice. Culture permeates the building. Bulletin boards and programs are filled with culturally relevant information. Most are of Aboriginal descent and even those who are not are made to feel they belong. The Aboriginal identity and culture is clearly alive and well and is displayed in all five senses throughout the building. Students feel a sense of community and the people who work there make it their mission to make it that way.

A Unique Partnership

N'Swakamok Alternative Secondary School is the product of a unique three-way partnership agreement between the local Friendship Centre, the provincial government and the local school board. Each partner contributes distinct and valuable resources to the joint initiative within a collaborative structure that is reviewed annually.

Aboriginal Community Support System

N'Swakamok Friendship Centre is considered one of the most well-established Native Friendship Centres in Ontario. The learning environment is unique for offering rich programs related to

every aspect of human development; in health and wellness, social supports systems, spiritual and mental wellness, physical motivational activities and much more. Students in need have these services, programs and resources available to them on site and expressed a great appreciation of that easy accessibility and the fact that their needs were being listened to and respected. There are strong partnerships with other Aboriginal organizations and non-Aboriginal organizations. The fund-raising activities and other special events help Alternative Secondary School students to build bridges within the community of Sudbury and develop their sense of citizenship and appreciation of community members.

Strong Leadership and Mentorship

There is strong evidence of moral, caring leadership in the place. The Executive Director of the Friendship Centre has carried this position for many years. The Program Leader of the Alternative Secondary School is passionate and committed. Individualized programming permits a degree of student mentoring in both academic and life skills that would not be possible in a larger setting. The Executive Director, staff and the Board members take pride in their students and demonstrate a common aspiration to enable Aboriginal youth who have dropped out of school to obtain their graduation diplomas.

Flexible Timetable

The flexibility of the Alternative Program accommodates those who for a range of reasons were unable to succeed in traditional classrooms. Students may enroll at any time of year. The independent, highly individualized program permits students to work part-time or fit their studies around family responsibilities and schedules. Students feel they can better focus when they know that they can still achieve other tasks during the day. The school encourages self-directed learners in an environment which combines personal responsibility with caring support.